

A Hunter's Tales

A Hunter's Trails



Ron Thomson

Volume 7

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By Ron Thomson

**The best of fair-chase/free-range big game hunting stories from colonial
Africa (Southern Rhodesia)
(1955 - 1980)**

Lions - and yet more about lions

Lions have captured mankind's imagination from time immemorial. In the modern era, however, lions are the subject of huge propaganda campaigns orchestrated by the animal rights NGOs who continue to disseminate the false impression that, in Africa, lions are on the brink of extinction. This is simply not true. The NGOs' purpose in telling these stories, however, is purely to make money out of gullible publics in the First World - and they are very successful. In fact, they are faring so well that their doctrine has developed into the biggest confidence industry the world has ever known.

Propaganda, by definition, is: ***“The spreading of ideas, information or rumour for the purpose of promoting an ideal - or injuring an institution, cause or person - by any means, true or false.” (Wikipedia).***

Propaganda, therefore, has nothing to do with truth or facts!

Dr Joseph Goebels, the propaganda minister for the Nazi Third Reich during World War II, is reputed to have coined the phrase: *“Repeat a lie a thousand times and it becomes the truth.”*

In the modern era the propaganda tempo seems to have been notched up a peg or two because it is now claimed that if you tell a lie just **THREE** times - **with enough passion** - the public will accept it as the truth.

The animal rights NGOs have had the best of teachers; and they have been avid pupils!

This mini book is about hunting lions. So if we are to enjoy these stories and accept them at face value, we have to confront the contradiction of the public's false perceptions. It will be easier to do this when we are armed with a true understanding about lions; what makes them tick; and what their real status is in Africa today.

Question. Have Africa's lions declined in recent decades?

Answer. In many places - YES! In some places the lion has disappeared. Yet
In others there has been no change in their numbers for decades.

Question: Is the African lion threatened with extinction?

Answer: Definitely NOT!

Question: So what is all the fuss about?

Answer: In the unemotional minds of those people who know the ecological
facts, there is no fuss. The arguments are created purely by and within the
propaganda apparatus of those confidence tricksters whose principle purpose
is to make money from the controversy they have so assiduously created. What
they are concerned about is money NOT what is best for the African lion.

Question: Is the African lion threatened in any way at all?

Answer: Again... In some places - YES! In others - NO! In the longer term,
however, the lion - and all other wildlife on the continent of Africa - is being
severely and increasingly threatened by Africa's massive human population explosion.

U.N. Statistics tell us that in Africa south of the Sahara Desert, the human population was 95.9 million in the year 1900. One hundred years later - in the year 2000 - it numbered 622 million. And, if the population expands during the 21st Century at the same rate that it did in the 20th Century (x 6.5), it will exceed 4 billion by the year 2100. In other words, there will be six times as many people living in this same region of Africa - then - as there are

today.

The lies surrounding *the African lion* have become ever more outrageous as the NGO propaganda juggernaut has gathered momentum. The same has happened with the elephant - and, in the process, the truth has been totally suppressed. The figures produced by the animal rights NGO's are either complete fabrications or they are distortions of the truth. They in no way reflect what is really happening across the continent. Tragically, this is detrimental to the African lion because, unless the facts about the species are properly understood, the management action that is falsely indicated, if it is applied, will cause our lions great harm.

So, before I start relating hunting stories, let's have a look at some specifics about the African lion.

The lion is a cat! It breeds like a cat - prolifically. Female lions are capable of breeding at 30 months of age and, if the cubs survive, their mothers will have litters every two years. And they will continue to produce cubs until they are 15. They normally have between one and four cubs - sometimes as many as six - but annual cub mortality in the wild can be as high as 50 percent or more.

A lioness keeps her cubs away from the pride until they are four months old. This requires that she hides them away when she is forced to seek food for herself. The cubs wean at six months old. Predators - other lions, leopards, hyenas and jackals - kill baby lion cubs when their mothers are not in attendance; and sometimes even when they are present - but the principal cause of cub mortality is starvation.

When the pride size is relatively small and optimum for its prey-base, and nutrition is adequate, litters are large and many cubs survive. When the pride size is large, however, and when its food source is marginal or insecure, cub mortality is high.

There is a pecking order in the feeding regime. The big males feed off a new kill first; lionesses second; half grown animals third; and the smaller cubs last. So the cubs feed on the leftovers and when that is not enough they starve - because when the big lions are replete they will not kill again until

they are hungry. It is not fun, therefore, being a cub in lion society when the parental prides are too big.

Should all the cubs in a litter die, the mother will replace them within four months. The gestation period is just over 100 days, so the breeding cycle is rapidly repeated.

Young lions are evicted from their parental prides when they are 22 months of age. The young males are then bigger than their mothers. Lions grow to independence, therefore, very quickly.

Lions are territorial animals. A big male, with a group of 1 to 4 females (and their young) form a pride and they mark out a territory - which they defend against intrusion by other lions. When there is more than one adult male in a pride, one of them is always dominant.

Evicted young lions become nomads. They have no territory of their own and wherever they go within a national park they encounter other lions, many of which are vagrants like themselves. More often than not, however, they encounter territorial prides which repeatedly chase them off. Nomads, therefore - wherever they go - are chased from pillar to post by the big territorial males; and by the adult lionesses, too - which see them as a threat to their cubs. Many nomads are killed by the territorial males; others die of starvation; and hyenas take their toll of food-stressed individuals.

Inevitably, however, many nomads stray across the boundaries of the national park where they find a land devoid of territorial lions; and full of abundant, easily caught prey (domestic cattle). These are the stock-killing lions that cause the human/lion conflict situations that are reported so often in the press.

It takes a nomadic male lion three or four years (after its eviction) to become large enough to challenge a territorial male for his pride and territory. Many don't survive that long. Should the young male succeed in his challenge he might kill the old male; or chase it away - turning it into an adult nomad. The deposed king will then suffer the same fate that young nomads face when *they* are first evicted. Most deposed territorial males don't live long once they lose their territories.

There are many reports to confirm that when a new male takes over an old king's territory, his lionesses come to him as the spoils of war; and, it is said,

he then kills all their cubs. Whether this happens *every* time there is a change in leadership is not yet confirmed. But... even if her cubs *are* killed by a new pride male it does not take the lioness long to replace them!

Regrettably, a lot of disinformation - concerning these human/lion conflict animals - is spread by the professional hunting fraternity and trophy hunters, too. It is, therefore, propaganda of another kind - but equally destructive. The hunters will tell you, for example, that their hunting of trophy lions (mature territorial males) reduces the human/lion conflict situation in Africa - but that is patently not true.

Territorial males never leave their established territories. To do so is to tempt fate. There are so many maturing nomadic males wandering in and around all the big game reserves in Africa, that should they find a territory that has been temporarily vacated by a dominant male, they will quickly take it over. And when the king returns he will have to fight the new owner (or owners) to regain his throne; and all his cubs would have been killed.

So the idea that big territorial males will leave their territories and kill cattle outside the boundaries of the national park, is just too bizarre an idea for anybody to seriously consider.

I have killed many stock killing lions on cattle ranches and in tribal areas outside the boundaries of Rhodesia's national parks. Except for two recently deposed old males, the others were all nomads between two and four years old. One may have been four - approaching five. So it is the nomads that are responsible for the human/lion conflict situations, not the big trophy-quality males.

Where there are lion populations living permanently outside national parks - for example, in areas set aside specifically for safari hunting - big males can still be obtained by trophy hunters. The hunting fraternity and the wildlife authorities, however, have to carefully ascertain how this can be managed without compromising the breeding component of the population.

Whether or not safari hunting reservations will persist in the future, however, I have no idea. Unless we can integrate the needs of the wildlife in these areas, with the needs of the people who will likely soon be living within or alongside them, the life of today's safari hunting areas may be very short-

lived. Over all our heads hovers the spectre of Africa's rapidly expanding human population which is poised to take over all land that is not yet declared to be a government protected area.

So, in the longer term, it may only be the stock-killing nomads that will remain available for hunting. But don't think of these lions as babies. They may not have long flowing manes but they are big in body - and in tooth and claw. They are a formidable quarry.

Most of these nomads - males and females - I consider to be '*surplus*' to the breeding populations (except that they represent a replacement reservoir for old territorial males whose time has come). Most nomads, however, succumb to the many pressures that lion society exerts on them during and throughout their maturing years; or they are shot, trapped or poisoned because they become stock-killers outside the sanctuaries.

Nomads sometimes breed, too, but their enforced-wandering circumstances dictate that their cubs will die.

There are very large numbers of lions living in Africa's national parks. Kruger National Park in South Africa, for example - a sanctuary of 8000 square miles (20 000 sq kms) in extent - carries between 1700 and 2200 lions. And other big African game reserves have equally large and stable lion populations. So the species is far from being extinct.

It is true that the natural '*range*' of the African lion is shrinking - as human populations increase and '*vacant*' land outside the national parks is filled up by man's agricultural and urban expansions. And the lions that once roamed those previously vast and vacant stretches of Africa have largely already disappeared. This state of affairs will continue, and become ever more intense, as the 21st century produces more and more humans.

What will not change - as long as the status of Africa's national parks does not alter - will be the numbers of lions that these prime sanctuaries permanently support. So the human/lion conflict situation will likely continue forever because surplus lions - the nomads - the stock-killers - will be produced every year in accordance with the lion populations' natural social structures.

The NGOs lament this whole state of affairs - when lions eat lions in one

form or another; and when man competes with lions for living space - and, like King Canute, they try to hoodwink the public into believing that nature's ecological rules can be waived. All these circumstances, they tell the world - twisted to suit their own agendas, of course - indicate that the African lion is facing extinction. You can now make up your own mind about that!

Certain lion populations - living in too small a game reserve - cannot and will not survive. Other lions will disappear because in the human/lion conflict situations, the humans will always win.

What is happening in all these regards is inevitable. As the human population increases so the numbers of lions living outside the national parks and game reserves will be constantly reduced - until there are none left. But as long as the big sanctuaries remain sacrosanct - like Kruger National Park (and there are many others as big, or bigger, than Kruger) - the lion, as a species, will continue to exist into posterity in large, healthy and relatively stable populations.

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Few people - including many reasonably experienced hunters - understand just how enormous a lion really is. Very big males stand upwards of 4 feet 2 inches (50 inches plus - or 1.3 metres) at the shoulder. I am an average-sized man - six feet tall. Fifty inches from the ground equates to the level of my nipples. They have a mass well in excess of 550 lbs (or 250 kgs). The biggest male recorded weighed 800 lbs. Females are two-thirds the size of males.

The head and body length of a big male lion is 8 feet (greater than 2 meters); females 6 feet. You can add to that another 3 feet (circa 1 metre) which is the length of their tails.

The shoulder height of an *average-sized* adult male lion will always exceed the level of my belly button.

When they are hunting, lions cover the last 100 yards (metres) of their chase in six seconds flat. So when you are seriously charged by a lion this is the kind of speed you have to contend with. By anybody's standard, this big cat is a mean adversary! It is no wonder hunters rank the lion as a primary trophy - not just because big males are awesomely handsome, but because

hunting a lion, of any shape or size, requires nerves of steel.

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Any kind of contact with any kind of animal teaches you something about it - and, often, a lot more about yourself. So it is with lions. The more you come in contact with them, and interact with them, the more you learn. And you don't have to be shooting lions to learn how to conduct yourself in their company - but every contact, no matter what the circumstances, gives you that little bit more confidence in yourself; and, ultimately, prepares you for the big challenge when your conduct during a serious confrontation makes the difference between your life and your death.

In November, 1960, I was the new-boy-on-the-block at Main Camp, Hwange National Park. I had arrived in the game reserve, just turned 21, the month before. Although I had, by then, hunted over 20 leopards on my own, I knew nothing about hunting elephants and buffaloes, or about lions. I was a very inexperienced cadet game ranger. Everything was strange to me and very exciting. I was then, for the first time in my life, living in a big game reserve where elephants, buffaloes and lions were living all around me.

That was 55 years ago. The circumstances at Main Camp were then very primitive - and very different - to what they are today. There were only four active field officers on station then: Senior Game Warden, Bruce Austen (to whom I reported); Senior Game Ranger Harry Cantle - whose main job was to keep the (then) 14 artificial game water supplies in operation; Game Ranger Tim Braybrooke; and me. The four of us were responsible for carrying out all wildlife management programmes in most of the 5000 square mile national park. Tim and I did nearly all the problem animal control work (big game hunting) that was required of us on the surrounding farms, commercial cattle ranches and tribal trust lands (native reservations)(or TTLs)!

A much smaller field station (and small tourist rest camp) was located at Robin's Camp, 100 miles away to the north. There was an assistant game warden and a young game ranger at Robins, but they did not really feature in the game reserve's ongoing wildlife management stakes.

As a new boy I was under the scrutiny of everyone on station. Although

nothing was said, I knew I was being carefully evaluated all the time. Everybody wanted to know my true worth. Where would I fit in to everyone's work programmes and comfort zones?

Traditionally, a new young game ranger's mettle was tested by sending him out on a horse patrol. And that is what Bruce Austen determined to do with me the week after the rains broke that month. I was instructed to prepare myself for a two-week-long horse patrol into the basalt country (north-west quarter) of the game reserve.

My mettle - my courage - was tested on that patrol, all right, especially with respect to my behaviour under challenging circumstances, when lions tried to take our pack animals. The two incidents I will be relating shortly provided me with a personal benchmark against which I measured my performances during all my subsequent confrontations with lions. They were, also, both an indication as to how the Bushmen moulded my character.

These stories also explain my apparent cool, calm and collected behavior when hunting man-eating lion groups later in my career. Two of these episodes are narrated at the end of this volume. You would not believe how I calmly conducted myself on those dangerous man-eating adventures (and others), however, unless you have some understanding about the learning curve I went through in my dealings with lions in the company of my Bushman trackers. This horse patrol represented the first rung on that long and arduous ladder.

As the only white man on the patrol I was, technically, '*in charge*'. The real patrol leader, however, was an Msili Bushman called Mbuyotsi - who knew the game reserve like the back of his hand. When Mbuyotsi was told he would be guiding this patrol, however, of his own volition he came to see me in the European single quarters where Tim and I lived. And he showed me the ropes throughout my preparations.

I knew how to ride a horse - what young white Rhodesian male in those days did not? - but I had never been totally reliant on a horse and mules for transport. I also did not know what kind of food to take; clothes; bedding; medications; mosquito net; tentage; saddles and bridles; rifle and ammunition - and whatever. All such paraphernalia was referred as my *katoonda*.

None of my white colleagues came anywhere near me - steering clear of me with obvious amusement. They, of course, had all been through this same mill themselves not many years before, so they knew and understood the rituals. They knew that one of the tests was how I would cope on my own; and how I would get on with the Bushman trackers that were assigned to me.

But I really had nothing to worry about. Mbuyotsi (pronounced Umjoyce) fussed around me like a mother hen.

We set off after breakfast one morning - out of Main Camp - headed for Shoot Pan alongside the little Rhodesia Railways village-depot of Dett. Shoot Pan got its name because it was located next to the Dett police shooting range. Having Shoot Pan as our first destination was by (trial and error) design. It was chosen because, if the novice game ranger had forgotten anything, he could nip into Dett on his first day out - on foot - and buy what he needed from one of the two small stores in the village.

It had been drummed into me that once I had set out on a horse patrol, there was no turning back - until the patrol ended. So I had to be properly equipped, supplied and prepared! Bruce Austen was a tough nut to crack! But when I had assessed the reasons for making Shoot Pan our first destination, I realised there was a soft streak in the old man's iron demeanor after all.

Mbuyotsi walked ahead with a bull-barrel .375 Magnum Winchester over his shoulder. I followed, sitting on a grey horse called Turk. Behind me came a Bushman called Ben - leading a loaded pack mule, called Whisky, by the halter. Following Ben was a Bushman called Kitso - leading another loaded pack mule called Brandy. Behind Brandy walked a Bushman called Rojas - who preceded a loose herd of six donkeys, five of which carried heavily packed saddles. The sixth donkey was a 'spare'. Finally, behind the loose herd of donkeys walked an apprentice tracker - the camp skivvy - whose job it was to chivvy the animals along from behind.

*This was the first time I had ever met Ben - who was to become my best friend,
expert tracker, tutor, and constant bush companion for the next 23 years.*

The patrol walked at a leisurely pace, one man and one animal behind the other - except for the undisciplined donkeys which simply followed the horse and mules.

Sitting up in the saddle gave me a grandstand view of the surrounding bush; and I quickly realised that it was my duty to tell Mbuyotsi what game animals - or lions - were located ahead of us as we walked along. We were all constantly conscious of the fact that the *horses* - which collective term included the horse, the mules and the donkeys - could be attacked by lions at any time. Nevertheless, although we often came across lions on these patrols, over the next three years not once were our animals ever attacked when we were saddled up and on the move. I, of course, did not know anything about any of these details on that first horse patrol of my career - so my eyes continuously searched for lions.

We camped that first night at Shoot Pan without encountering any problems. When we arrived there in the early afternoon, we immediately unpacked the animals, individually knee-hobbled the horse and the mules, and sent them all out to graze. Two Bushmen - Ben and Rojas - stood guard over them.

We had two guards (instead of just one) on the first day out, Mbuyotsi told me, because the biggest problem on the first day was that the *horses* would run back home to Main Camp. Being forewarned we were forearmed; and *that* never happened on my watch.

Shoot Pan was a good first night camp site for another reason. There was a group of small trees that enabled us to tether the horses in one tight group - each animal being allocated its own tree. And they all knew which tree was theirs. They had all been to Shoot Pan many times before.

The horse and the mules came running into camp before the sun had set that day, as soon as Ben had rattled a handful of crushed mealies (maize) in an empty tin can. That noise was their dinner gong. The three bigger animals each got one tin of grain every evening. The donkeys got nothing.

The other Bushmen - those that were not acting as horse guards - occupied themselves gathering dry firewood that afternoon, and they prepared three sites for separate fires at strategic places around the horses. After supper we

arranged ourselves in three groups of two - one group per fire. Mbuyotsi elected to share my groundsheet tarpaulin. Whereas I slept in my bedding on a camp stretcher, Mbuyotsi slept under a single blanket on top of the groundsheet.

The fires were kept burning - slowly - all night long. Had lions come to take one of the horses during the night, everyone was geared to quickly make each fire a roaring success; and to chase the predators off with waving firebrands. I slept that night with the rifle lying on the groundsheet next to my bed. It was loaded and on safe! No lions came so the night passed uneventfully.

The next morning I asked Mbuyotsi's advice: "*What should I have done last night,*" I inquired, "*if the lions had come to take one of the horses?*"

"*Shoot the lion,*" was his immediate retort.

"*And if I had shot the lion? What then?*"

"*Then you would have been in big trouble, Nkosana (Little Chief).*"

'Nkosana?' *In those days, remember, I was very new... very young... and totally*

unsalted. I still had to earn the title 'Nkosi' (Big Chief); and only the efflux of time

would bring that about.

"*Why so, Mbuyotsi?*" I replied - puzzled.

"*Because you would have had to explain to Malindela why you shot the lion - and he would not have accepted whatever explanation you offered him.*"

'Malindela' (*The one who follows*) was Game Warden Bruce Austen's African

honour name. He was the 'big boss' and everybody 'sabisa-ed' him. To 'saba'

(or to 'sabisa') someone is to both 'fear' and to 'respect' him - an intriguing and

somewhat contradictory African concept, both parts of which mean exactly the

same thing.

“So it would be better if I let the lion kill one of the horses?”

“No, Nkosana!” Mbuyotsi raised his voice - looking at me, aghast at the idea. And about this he was absolutely emphatic. “If you had let the lion kill one of the horses you would have been in even bigger trouble with Malindela. We protect the horses at all cost. We never allow the lions to kill our horses.”

I was now greatly confused. “So what do I do if a lion comes in the night to take one of the horses, Mbuyotsi?”

“You chase it away, Nkosana! We all chase it away.” Mbuyotsi seemed to understand the simple logic in this answer. He clearly did not understand my uncertainty.

I looked at Mbuyotsi and shook my head. I was beginning to understand that I was in for a very interesting horse patrol with this Bushman. He had an answer for everything but, very often, what he said seemed not to make sense - except to him!

The next day we travelled another 10 miles through the bush - another short haul trip - and we camped that night at Inyantue. I don’t know how the Bushman found Inyantue but he did. He simply arrived at the destination, out of the bush, and on the dot.

Over the years, Mbuyotsi and I had some interesting discussions about how he navigated the vast bush lands and teak forests of Hwange. He most certainly did know the game reserve like the back of his hand. And, in that respect, on that first horse patrol, this strange man constantly surprised me.

Mbuyotsi and I ultimately became very tightly bonded friends - just as Ben and I

became inseparable. There was one difference between them, however, and that

determined the course of our respective careers: Ben was by far the

*better
tracker!*

Storm clouds gathered in the late afternoon and had not dissipated by nightfall. Rain, therefore, was a probability during the night. When we made camp around the horses that evening, my 6 foot by 8 foot tarpaulin groundsheet became my tent.

To make it, the Bushmen cut two stout forked sticks from the surrounding bush and set them in holes they dug into the ground - nine feet apart. The notches of the forks were 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 ridge-pole - cut from the nearby bush - to support the weight of the tarpaulin.

The tarpaulin had large round brass eyelets positioned at one-foot intervals along its edges. Three feet lengths of buffalo riem (rawhide rope) had been permanently tied into every one. The tarp was laid over the ridgepole, 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 onto one side of the tent. Then they unrolled my valise over it and organised the already made-up bed inside. My mosquito net was tied to the ridgepole and its hem was tucked into the bedding all around. The two trackers did everything while I just stood back and watched.

On the other side of the tent, opposite my bed, they constructed a rough platform of bush poles, on the ground, and onto it they placed the four mule pack boxes. On top of the boxes went the mule pack saddles, Turk's saddle and all three bridles. It was important to keep our leather equipment safe from marauding hyenas in the night.

The weight of all this gear pressed the tarpaulin tent sheet upwards. There was so little room inside the tent that my stretcher pushed against the outside tarpaulin roof on the one side; and up against the inside edges of the four

mule pack boxes, on the other. The *only* way I could get into bed was by opening the mosquito net at the foot of it, crawling onto the bed, and tucking the net back under the mattress behind me.

Whilst my camp was being constructed, the other trackers organised two very similar bivouacs for themselves: for two Bushmen in one and three in another. They were set in strategic positions around the horses to give the animals the required protection from lions during the night. Fires were arranged next to each bivvy.

Everybody prayed that it would not rain.

I had a splash bath that night, in my one-yard-square, six inches deep canvas bathtub - as I had done the previous evening. It was prepared, again, by Ben. He also cooked my simple meal after the bath - rice, baked beans and a tin of herrings in tomato sauce. Ben was really no cook at all, but he was learning how to prepare a rudimentary meal and how to heat canned food.

That evening - after supper - I sat around the campfire with the five Bushmen. They regaled me with stories of previous horse patrols. And they told me about past big game hunts - elephant, buffalo and lion - conducted by the senior members of the Hwange Game Reserve team. They loved talking about Bruce - which they did with a great deal of rare respect.

After dark, we listened to elephants drinking from the nearby earth-walled Inyantue dam. And we heard a lion roaring far away down the river line. Mbuyotsi told me he believed it was located somewhere near an old, and long ago silted up, concrete weir near the Inyantue railway siding. Thus did I start learning about the game reserve - from such conversations with the Bushman trackers.

The lion was a topic of some lengthy discussion. The Bushmen were very conscious of the danger that lions posed to the horses in the night. Nevertheless, they soon returned to previous happier conversations about other subjects.

I asked questions about horse patrolling, and about big game hunting. The trackers answered as best they could.

I was learning a lot simply by conversing with them. I was learning all the

time with everything that I did - and they did. I soaked it all up like a sponge. The Bushmen were mines of information. They knew all about nature and things natural. And I was made to realise again and again that I still had an awful lot to learn.

The Bushmen wanted to know more about me, my parents, and the family's two farms at Karoi. They could not understand why I was '*wasting my time*' being a game ranger when I could retire from government and work on one of the family farms.

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 storm drew closer and 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 their fires. Mbuyotsi and Ben lit my fire early and perked it up too. Their expectations, I fear, were pious. Sparkles of fire percolated upwards through the raindrops. The rain soon became too much and when it came down in regular, steady torrents we gave up trying to keep the fires going.

Very soon we all retired to our beds in the three tented bivouacs around the horses. Mbuyotsi abandoned me that night and crawled into one of the other tents.

In the years ahead, I always slept on my own when on horse patrol - but I also made sure that my bed was located upwind of the horses. The Bushmen constantly fed their fires during the night - which I was expected to do, too, but never did. Consequently my fires were always stone dead by dawn.

Most nights we slept in the open on top of our ground sheet tarpaulins. So we were truly very exposed.

Being upwind of the horses, however, meant, if a lion paid a visit to the

camp

during the night, the horses would smell it and wake me up with their squealing.

Consequently few big cats ever came near my bed.

With that arrangement, two Bushmen, and three Bushmen, respectively, would

occupy the other two camp sites; and they kept their fires burning all night long.

The lightning intensified, repeatedly illuminating the bush all around us with huge flashes of white light. The thunder crashed incessantly - frighteningly close. And then the eye of the storm enveloped us.

The horses were stolid. Standing still and silent with their heads held low, they simply let the rain pour down out of the skies and over their bodies. They had no option. Each one was tied to the tree trunk in front of it. They had experienced such storms many times before and were inured to all such natural phenomena.

I was overwhelmed 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 beneath the sheets and blankets. The rifle lay on top of the blankets and a 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 - the cracking strikes of lightning; 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 tree high above our heads.

There was the fresh bouquet that rain brings out of the parched earth. There was the haunting smell of burning logs, of sizzling hot coals and of white wood ash being dampened by the rain.

Intermittently, when there was a gap between the claps of thunder, I could hear water trickling through the tent between the logs that were underneath the pack boxes. It ran under my camp stretcher between its metal legs - and

out into the night. 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 and I believed it just couldn't get any better. I was surrounded by *my* kind of people. My white colleagues understood me and 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 was now working 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, right 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.

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Sometime in the early hours of the morning I was shocked into wakefulness by the sudden screaming of horses. It was a frightening, eerie sound that I never thought possible from a horse. But they 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 had to know what was happening. I sat still and listened. My head inside the mosquito net was squashed up against the canvas. Apart from the weird noises the horses were making, all I could hear and feel, through the canvas, was the drumming of steady rain on my head.

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! That told me the horses were, for the time being anyway, safe.

I moved to the bottom of the bed and started to pull out the confining mosquito net from under the toe of the mattress. I had to get outside and help Mbuyotsi! I recovered the torch from next to the bed.

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 continued 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. But he had been lucky. I had damn near pulled off a shot!

The Bushman now had his head inside the bottom end of my tent. "COME QUICKLY," he urged me. "A LION IS IN THE CAMP."

It was only at that moment, when I was confronted by the fact I was going to have to venture into the storm, that I realised I had not brought along any kind of personal protection against the rain. I had neither a raincoat nor a waterproof jacket. Both were still in my single quarter's clothes cupboard back at Main camp. A lesson had been learnt!

I scrambled out into the rain. I had my rifle in one hand, the torch in the other, and I was otherwise stark naked. I switched on the torch and swung the beam towards the horses. All I could see was a glistening silver curtain of falling raindrops. They acted like a mirror reflecting the light back at me from no more than three or four feet range.

Mbuyotsi's voice screamed at me above the still squealing and panicky horses: SHOOT THE LION, NKOSANA... SHOOT IT."

"ITS OVER HERE...." Kitso shouted into my ear, pulling at my arm. He had to shout to make himself heard above the noise of the cascading rain.

"HOW DO YOU KNOW IT IS OVER HERE?" I shouted back at him.

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 the lion breathing. I was then quite sure he *had* heard a lion in our camp.

When we got to the place in the pitch-blackness - where he said he had heard the lion - I could hear nothing. We both stood still and listened. Nothing! All I could hear was the falling rain. The torch was worse than useless.

I suddenly 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 exactly 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 report had been so muffled, however, I believed it would not have had any such effect.

Nevertheless, the rifle in my hands was a comfort but I still felt totally inadequate. When I had fired that shot I was shooting blind. I again stood and listened. The horses stopped their squealing. I listened harder! I could still hear nothing but the falling rain. I could still 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 straight in amongst them.

The animals were calmer now. Mbuyotsi, Ben and Rojas, even the little camp skivvy - the apprentice tracker - were standing alongside them, stroking their faces, fondling their muzzles and talking to them.

I guessed the shot had chased the lion away after all. It might have done!

The beam of my torch was shining at the ground but I could see in the reflected light that the animals were still agitated and very alert. Their heads were up, their ears were pricked and 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 lurking 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 skull and 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 outside our little lager. I was listening for the heavy breathing sounds that Kitso had heard. I had no idea what time it was, 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 and 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, shoulders and the top of my head were on fire with the pain of the persistent heavy rain drop strikes.

“*HAH!*” Mbuyotsi 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. He had concluded that fact from the horses’ behaviour. There was a reason for the sudden increase in their alertness!

I became myself, 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 - mere yards away. My heart skipped a beat.

I remembered all these sensations when, a week after we got back to Main

Camp, I was dispatched to shoot a stock-killing lion in a nearby tribal reservation.

The huge size and ferocity of the lion I trapped and shot on that occasion brought

home to me what I had actually confronted that night in the rain. Just the thought

of what we had experienced - long after the event - left my nerves in tatters. I

realised, then, that I was no match for such a potent adversary; but in my

ignorance at the time, I did not appreciate any of this. When I had that stock-

killing lion lying dead at my feet, however, I suddenly understood - and an all

powerful fear gripped at my heart. In retrospect, I realised that I didn't have a

chance against such a powerful and ferocious animal - especially under those

conditions? In the darkness and in the rain that night, I had been completely at

the lion's mercy.

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 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 a 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, however, 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 back to me and, without a word, wrapped it around my shoulders. For the first time in I don't know how many hours, I began to feel warm again.

But I could still not feel my bare feet. They were blocks of ice.

Kitso brought blankets to the other Bushmen. One by one, they wrapped them around their shoulders, too. 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 - searching - probing - 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 see things in the dark - and to recognise other signs of danger through extra sensory powers which they, the Bushmen, did not have. The trackers, therefore, used the horses as living detectors to determine the presence of a *danger* that the Bushmen could not see, feel, smell or hear themselves.

The dawn was a long time coming. I knew it had arrived, however, when I saw a grey paleness pervading the eastern skyline. Thereafter, slowly, this murky pale smudge turned yellow, then red. And as the stain hemorrhaged across the rim of the horizon, the red-billed francolins (pheasants) began to chatter below the earthen dam wall.

Very soon I was able to see the surrounding bush without the aid of the torch. I did a final tour round the horses - looking seriously hard for the lion. There was none to see. It had gone.

Ground hornbills began *brummmmming* in the faraway distance. The dawn had come! I went back to Mbuyotsi who was still standing amidst the animals! He was holding Turk by the halter and stroking the horse's face with his free hand. His clothes were sopping wet from the rain. And his body, like mine, was shaking wildly from the cold.

"I can't see anything," I told the Bushman. *"I think the lion has gone."*

I looked around me at the men. There was a starkness and a paleness in their faces. They were, like me, practically immobilized by the cold. None of them had fared any better, or worse, than I had done during the night. We had all had a grueling experience. This was a story the Bushman trackers would tell for many years to come.

Mbuyotsi nodded. He spoke to the other Bushmen, using their click language, so I had no idea what he said to them.

I guess he told them they could stand down because every one of them immediately left their night's cold vigil amongst the horses, and they made their way to where the previous night's cooking fire had been located. There, much to my astonishment, they hauled a hammer-flattened piece of *malata* - a onetime sheet of corrugated iron - off the fire place. There were smouldering hardwood mopani logs and bright red coals beneath. In this manner, the trackers had saved one of the fires from the heavy downpour; and it did not take them long to have the logs 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 resurrected fire. And slowly we all thawed out.

Ben, without asking, took coffee from my mule-pack box and prepared steaming mugs of the beverage for everyone. I did not complain. After last night, I would have shared what was left of my life with the devil, if he had contributed - as the trackers had done - to our mutual survival during night!

For the next hour we sat around the campfire on our haunches, drinking hot black coffee from our tin mugs - letting the heat permeate our frigid souls; feeling it thaw out our frozen bodies and aching muscles. And we chatted.

At first talk was scarce. Everybody was more concerned about getting warm

than discussing what had happened during the night. Then slowly the chatter began. Grimaces turned to grins. Silence was replaced with laughter.

I had to endure considerable banter about my totally naked state throughout the night; standing in the pouring rain - unashamedly - with a rifle in one hand and a useless torch in the other; and with a hungry lion running around growling at us out of the darkness. One comic mooted that *that* was the reason the lion was scared away - because it had seen me naked. It was a comment that elicited a huge roar of laughter.

The repartee was all given, and taken, in good faith and good humour.
We all
knew that it was so dark we wouldn't have seen our own hands had we
held them
in front of our faces.

I didn't mind. I accepted the jocular wordplay as an indication that I was being accepted into the Bushmen's fold.

I inquired of Mbuyotsi from where he had obtained the '*malata*' - that incongruous sheet of battered metal that had kept the heart of the fire alive. He told me that everywhere in the game reserve where they camped regularly on horse patrol, they had a similar sheet of metal hidden away. They were prepared - anywhere and everywhere - therefore, for the kind of wild storm we had endured the previous night. Such were the simple survival strategies of these remarkable people. It made me realise that my life was very safe in their competent hands.

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We spent the next two nights at Shumba Camp on the main tourist road between Main Camp and Robin's Camp. We were *on holiday* Mbuyotsi decreed - R & R - to recover from the exigencies of our night in the storm with the lion.

Shumba comprised four thatched huts - each equipped with two beds (without linen or blankets) - which tourists could hire by special arrangement. The camp functioned more as a daytime picnic site than a rest camp, however, because Bruce was reluctant to let unversed city-slickers be

exposed to the wilds of Hwange at night without responsible supervision. Only special groups, therefore, enjoyed the privilege. Shumba was equidistant from Main Camp and Robins Camp - which were exactly 100 miles apart. Hwange is a big game reserve!

In those days, Hwange was closed to tourists from November to April - the rainy

season - when most roads were a quagmire. So, on that occasion, there was no

chance that we would bump into tourists.

At Shumba we relaxed and recharged our batteries after the exhausting challenges we had faced at Inyantue. The camp was ring-fenced with six-foot high pig mesh so, inside the camp, we and the horses were safe from lions. At night, the horses were tethered to the hanging roots of a big fig tree that dominated centre stage in the camp, and we all slept soundly on beds inside the huts. The camp skivvy - the apprentice tracker - slept on the ground outside with the horses.

After Shumba we headed northeast, traversing 15 miles of rough rocky ridges on which grew uninspiring woodland scrub and, in the drainage lines, open mopani veld. At two o'clock we reached our planned destination - Tshakabika Hot Springs.

Tshakabika is a hot spring of some renown to the game rangers and Bushmen of Hwange. The piping hot water bubbles out of the ground inside a round cauldron some 15 feet across and two feet deep. Several small eyes issue continuous mixtures of gas and hot water into the centre of the pool.

The spring is located in the middle of a large flat basin of black soil - a hundred yards across - on which, after the recent rains, the short-cropped grass was starting to regenerate. This provided the horses with ample sweet grazing. All around us 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 by digging a hole in the sand above where the

spring water entered the water course. There the water was fresh, clean and sweet. Downstream the water was 'brak' (salty) and it 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; but it was a focal point where we could tether the horses at night.

There was no sign of rain so the trackers arranged my camp stretcher on top of the tarpaulin - now once again acting as my groundsheet - not far from the tree trunk; placing the four mule-pack boxes in a row, on top of the groundsheet, to one side of my bed. Turk's saddle, the two mule pack-saddles, and all the bridles, were spread out across the top of the boxes as usual - off the ground.

Turk and the two mules were knee-hobbled and turned out to graze. The donkeys followed them - un-hobbled as normal - onto the open green grass. Kitso was appointed the first horse guard of the day and he settled down in camp, doing minor chores, whilst keeping a sharp eye on the grazing horses.

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. I was to find out that there was a very definite hierarchy amongst the Bushmen whose seniority was largely based upon the status of the game ranger - or the game warden - that used them the most as a tracker, when hunting dangerous big game.

The trackers also functioned as their game rangers' chief patrol assistants when

on tour - whether they be undertaking problem animal control duties outside the

park, or game management duties inside it. The game ranger and his tracker

became cemented as a permanent patrol team.

There was a dark grey puddle of what looked like powdery mud lying on the bottom of the cauldron. Crystal clear water covered it. Water and gas bubbled up through the mud blanket that reacted with the viscosity of mercury. The mud looked like grey-black porridge cooking in a huge round pot.

I knelt down and took a handful of 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 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 lying nearby, and he blocked the channel with them.

“Why are you doing that?” I asked him - puzzled.

He smiled and said: *“This is your bath today, Nkosana. We block the passage to make the water inside the cauldron deeper. By this evening this whole basin will be full.”*

I smiled at the thought. *What a good idea!* And 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 and was within easy reach of my bed.

I lay down on the bed and removed a soft-cover novel from under my pillow. Reading it would make me drowsy in the middle of the day - and that would enable me to enjoy a short kip whilst the sun was still high in the sky. At four o'clock Mbuyotsi and I - as usual - would be patrolling the surrounding area on foot until nightfall.

Mbuyotsi and Ben busied themselves repairing broken saddlery. They had brought an awl along with them, some heavy needles, and a roll of thin waxed nylon cord. I watched them obliquely as they secured a flap that was detaching from one of the heavy leather donkey packs.

I rolled onto my back. For a brief moment I watched Kitso. He was sitting on a nearby rock paring a thin stick with a penknife - which he intended to use for some or other camp purpose.

Rojas and the camp skivvy were moving back and forth between the camp and the nearby woodland. They were bringing dry firewood into camp for the evening fires. This was an essential chore for our every camp.

Everybody was busy. Nobody spoke a word.

A black-throated canary was singing quietly from the branches of the tree above my head. I dozed off, dropping the book onto my chest.

Everything, however, 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 quietude that pervaded our camp.

The lion slipped quietly off the hillside and sneaked into the dry river bed beyond the hot spring cauldron. The stream bank there 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 horse. It 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 body to face the camp. When it was facing directly away from it, the lion sprang silently onto the tableland on top of the riverbank. It quickly 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 assessed the situation. 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 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, immediately 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 centre 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 at Kitso! None of them looked towards the lion behind them - so they did not see the danger. The donkey, the centre of attraction, stomped its feet. Then, realizing that Kitso was running directly towards it, it turned to gallop away. Only when it turned did the donkey see 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; and the oncoming 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 the donkey's forward momentum towards the lion was just too great a force. Its feet did a wheel-spin and it fell down onto its side.

Scrabbling to regain its feet the donkey panicked. It paddled with all four feet trying to get up. This made it rotate on the ground, like a spinning top, its body pivoting on the point of its bottom shoulder.

The lion was by this stage in a full blown charge; and the gap between it and the donkey closed 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. And all the while he brandished his weapons - threatening the big cat with his little stick and his puny penknife.

I still could not shoot because Kitso's body now completely covered the fast approaching lion. The lion put on brakes. Its forelegs shot out straight in front of its body, its paws skidded 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. And I did not want to waste a wild shot, in an attempt to distract the lion, because I knew I might - very 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 very quick and very accurate. There would be no room for error.

Mbuyotsi and Ben were fast approaching the scene but they were still too far away to make any difference. And they, too, were both totally unarmed.

The lion stopped within touching distance of the shrieking Bushman - who stood his ground.

The donkey finally scrambled to its feet and galloped back towards the camp. For a short while the donkey was positioned directly between me and Kitso; and Kitso was still between me and lion.

Things were just not going my way!

Kitso continued to shout at the top of his voice. And all the while he danced about in front of the lion like a whirling dervish. He leant forward and tried to 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 fractions of an inch.

The lion backed off. It cast a hesitant glance towards Mbuyotsi and Ben who were approaching fast. It looked back at Kitso and it snarled again. Deciding that discretion was the better part of valour, the big cat suddenly turned and ran off in great leaps and bounds - back towards the dry river bed.

Kitso took off after it, waving his little stick and brandishing his open penknife. And 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 (hill) beyond. Kitso crashed onto the sand and pursued the lion up the side of the hillock.

Mbuyotsi and Ben stopped at the riverbank. But only when the lion had disappeared over the hill did Kitso stop running.

Kitso turned then and made his way slowly back to the dry river bed. I could hear Mbuyotsi and Ben laughing together, remonstrating profusely with their friend. They laughed whilst still ridiculing him for his efforts. Kitso walked disconsolately across the sand to the riverbank. There Mbuyotsi and Ben

leant down and, each taking one of Kitso's hands, they hauled him onto level ground. Still their laughter and their mockery continued.

The three of them walked back to camp laughing their heads off; and joking amongst themselves. Kitso joined in the fun, at last realizing what a spectacle he had made of himself; and suddenly understanding that he was lucky not to have been killed by the lion. They were all still laughing, and Mbuyotsi and Ben were still cajoling their *stupid* friend, when they reached me.

"Why did you chase the lion away like that, Kitso?" I asked the Bushman - now remonstrating with him myself. But there was a grin all over my face that I could not suppress. I was amused and relieved, yet my body was still shaking with anxiety. Kitso's brief encounter with the lion had covered a very tense and electrifying few moments. I was happy that he was safe, and that he had saved the donkey. But I felt I had to demonstrate that I was angry with him, too. *"That lion could have killed you,"* was my final comment.

"Haaiiiieee... Nkosana," Kitso shook his head. *"You placed me in charge of the horses. So it was my job to see that the lion did not kill the donkey."*

"Kitso! 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 to my care this afternoon."*

Kitso was clearly prepared to argue his every action. 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 the horses,"* Mbuyotsi continued, *"he would have killed me."*

"So you did all this because you sabah Nkosi Malindela?" I saw the light.

"Yes, Nkosana," Kitso admitted honestly. *"I did it because I sabah Nkosi Malindela".*

Kitso's fear of and 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.

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It was within this milieu that I learnt how to *sabah* the king of the jungle - how I learnt how to *fear* and to *respect* the African lion.

The Bushmen and I - on horse patrol - had many exciting skirmishes with these big cats but never once did any of the horses return from patrol with so much as a scratch on it.

This, my first horse patrol, was a baptism of fire because to have had two such lion attacks in as many days was unheard of. Sometimes - patrol after patrol - for weeks on end - we never laid eyes on a single lion. But they were always around; and we always had to have our sensors out to protect the horses.

In this way I learned how to conduct myself when in a lion's company. Every contact I had with them, I learnt something new - and my confidence grew. This was the advantage of being a game ranger as well as a big game hunter. I lived cheek by jowl with ALL of Africa's big game animals and I learned what made them tick under all kinds of different circumstances. My contacts with them did not *just* occur when I was hunting them; and that made all the difference!

And that little bit of reality tells a very big story!

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The Salankomo Man-eaters

In March 1965 I was the Senior Game Ranger in charge of the Binga District.

My late wife, Barbara, was more than halfway through her first pregnancy and discovering that having babies at Binga was problematical. The nearest medical facility for expecting mothers was in Bulawayo 300 miles away. So we were in Bulawayo visiting her paediatrician in the early part of the month. As usual, we stayed with our friends Roy and Amy Hooper.

En route back to Binga, before leaving the city, I called in to say goodbye to my boss, Regional Game Warden John Tebbit.

“Thank goodness you called in,” he said earnestly when I walked into his office. “A lion killed and ate a little boy at Salankomo late yesterday afternoon. I’d like you to go up there and attend to it.”

I knew Salankomo well. I had shot a lot of elephants and buffaloes in the area - and lions - during my three year service in Hwange National Park. It was only 10 miles from the game reserve’s southern boundary.

“But Salankomo comes under Main Camp, Hwange,” I protested. “Shouldn’t Main Camp be handling this one?”

“They don’t have anybody they can send,” John Tebbit replied immediately. “None of the young rangers at Main Camp have the experience needed to handle this job. So you are ‘it’. I have already volunteered your services.”

“But...”

“No buts, Ron! You’ve got to go on this one. You’ll just have to leave Babs with Roy and Amy for another few days and get up to Salankomo pronto.”

John Tebbit knew that I never left home without my camping kit, my .458

Magnum rifle and my Bushman tracker, Ben. They were all part of my persona.

So I re-deposited my pregnant wife with our friends; and Ben and I set off for Salankomo.

En route we passed through the Tjolutjo government outpost where I called in to see the District Commissioner (D.C.). There I learned more about the killing and got an update on the situation.

The previous afternoon, two native piccannins were herding the family cattle back to their village when a lion attacked and killed one of the boys. The other little boy ran back to his village where he reported the attack to his father. The old man immediately sent one of his older sons, on his bicycle, to report the matter to the D.C.'s messenger at Pelindaba which was 10 miles away.

Pelindaba was one of the DC's outlying patrol camps. There was a telephone there linking the camp to the DC's Tjolutjo office. So a report about the killing was relayed to the D.C. that evening.

In the meantime other things had happened. The father and a group of men, all armed with spears, were led back to the scene of the killing by the surviving herd boy. It was their intention to recover the dead boy's body before the lion had completely devoured it. They arrived at the site just before dark.

What the men found was not only one lion but four; and they had by then consumed every morsel of their victim's body.

The father, marshalling his forces, rushed in to chase the lions off, but they were not in the mood to be harassed. They stood their ground. The men faltered and the old man soon found himself confronting the lions by himself.

The biggest lion - the only one with a black mane - rushed at the old man and very quickly had him screaming on the ground. The other men ran off,

regrouped and decided that discretion was the better part of valour. The old man's screams were quickly extinguished so they assumed (correctly) that the lions had killed him. The defeated army then returned post haste to their village.

It was only after his office opened at 8 o'clock the next morning that the DC learned of the second killing.

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Ben and I reached Salankomo late in the afternoon. I knew where the village was - which made things easier. It was, in fact, Ben's old stamping ground. He had grown up in a small Bushman settlement near Salankomo - and, originally, all of Main Camp's Bushmen trackers came from this locale. The villagers knew all about *Mahohboh* (which was my native honour name). It meant: *'the man who left heaps of dead elephants behind him'*.

I was confronted by a very sombre family. They were none the less pleased that I had come to their assistance so quickly. In response to my enquiry, they told me that the nearby Salankomo Pan was full of good clean rain water, but they were concerned that Ben and I intended to camp there out in the open.

Without my asking for assistance, they loaded up a scotch-cart with firewood, harnessed two donkeys to it, and followed the Land Rover to the Pan. They arrived after we had set up camp and they unloaded the firewood next to the Land Rover. They were not about to let me sleep in the open without a big fire when there were man-eating lions on the prowl.

They also brought a dog with them. It was a good dog, they told me, and it would bark at the lions if they came in the night. They tethered it to the Land Rover's front bumper.

The night passed without incident and I was up at the crack of dawn. Ben made us some sweet tea and we both chewed on biltong (jerky) for breakfast. Having served its purpose Ben released the dog.

Then out of nowhere a little black boy appeared. He was no more than eight years old. He stood on the edge of the camp watching us silently. Ben asked him what he wanted. The boy told us that he wanted us to kill the lion that had taken his father and brother. He was the survivor of both attacks! I smiled at the little man and was impressed by his cast iron guts. He was prepared, he informed us, to show us where the lions were.

There was no sign of any grown man from the village!

The site where the killings had taken place was not far from our camp, so Ben and I walked there following in the boy's wake. He took us straight to a group of small trees off to one side of a short-cropped grassy vlei.

My rifle was loaded with solids. Three in the magazine, one pressed into the breech. I hitched the heavy cartridge belt, with its 25 extra rounds of ammunition, into a more comfortable position around my hips. Then I flipped the Mauser safety catch into the fully off position.

Ben instructed the boy to stay close behind us as we made our way towards the trees. The tracker was carrying a full pack of 20 rounds in his left hand. The pack was open and the inside sleeve was pulled halfway out. He was ready to feed me ammunition should I need it.

I did not expect to find the lions. The bodies of one old man and a little boy would have long ago been consumed by four big lions. But I was wrong. As we approached the coppice we were stopped by a heavy growl. The three of us looked carefully into the thicket.

My nerves were tingling but I was not worried. At that stage in my career I had been confronted by this kind of standoff with lions many times.

I looked briefly at the little boy. He was standing erect, his shoulders held back proudly, his face impassive, and his eyes were steadfastly trying to locate the lion amongst the thick leaves of the coppice. My heart went out to him. What a brave little boy he was!

Suddenly one of the lions charged. It irrupted from the thicket in an

explosion of energy and high bluster. It was the big black-maned male that I had been told about. I immediately assumed it must be the ringleader of the pack.

My rifle came up to my shoulder. My cheek nuzzled into the stock. My eyes sought the open iron sights.

Suddenly the lion stopped. It stood stock still right out in the open, its head held high, its eyes boring into mine; and it chuntered angrily at us from a distance of no more than 30 yards. Confronted by a white man with a rifle, who was clearly not frightened of its empty gestures, was a different kettle of fish to a nervous old black man with a spear.

I gave the lion no chance to make up its mind - to charge or to turn and run away. As long as it stood there in the open the advantage was mine. I quickly placed the foresight bead between its eyes, wrapped the rear vee sight around it, and I squeezed the trigger.

My .458 has a light almost hair-trigger so it only needed a touch to fire the weapon. The butt hit hard against my shoulder, the stock kicked up into my cheek. The lion dropped dead in its tracks.

Number one was down.

There were no other lions about. The old boy had been by himself.

All that was left of the two bodies were a few bones. I am always amazed at how little lions leave of a man when they kill and eat him. Just the domes of the two skulls were intact. The bigger leg bones had been stripped and the ends had been chewed off. Everything else - including all the other bones - had been consumed.

This lion was abnormally thin. I had seen emaciated lions before but not like this one. And its body was covered in fighting scars. It had undoubtedly been a territorial pride male inside the national park until a few months previously - when it must have been defeated in a fight with a younger male. So it was now an old nomad.

Later in the day, when I had the opportunity to skin it and to open it up, I discovered that it had a large growth on its stomach - probably cancerous. All these things combined had made the lion a man-killer and a man-eater.

We returned to our camp. I was preparing to go and pick up the dead lion in the Land Rover when we heard a loud hullabaloo coming from the nearby village. There was a look of consternation on the little boy's face. Ben spoke to him.

"He says," Ben explained, "the other lions are in the village."

I jumped into the Land Rover. Ben threw the little boy onto the open back then climbed in beside him, my rifle in his hands.

The village was in turmoil. The women were gathering their scattered children together and hustling them into the huts. The men were standing shouting into the distance.

"What happened?" I inquired.

"The lions came into the village," one man volunteered. *"We have just chased them away."*

"Where... where did they go?"

"Over there," I was told. *"They ran off through that gap in brush fence on the edge of the ploughed field."* The man said, pointing to the gap.

Ben and I walked quickly over to the hole in the bush-fence. There were lion pug marks in the soft soil. We set off on the tracks.

Ben was a superb tracker. In his normal taciturn manner he followed the tracks as fast as he could. We were close behind the lions and Ben knew I would not want to lose this advantage.

"There are three of them," Ben turned his head, briefly, to tell me.

At first the lions moved fast. I visualised them loping hard through the low brush of the chopped out teak scrub. When they entered the teak forest proper, however, they slowed right down to a casual walk. One of them had stopped to urinate. Fresh urine was still held in the cups of some dried and curled leaves on the ground.

Then in the distance, off to the right, I heard the clanging sound of cattle gongs. The use of galvanized steel gongs hanging about their cattle's necks was the only way the local people ever found their stock in the heavy forest.

Fifty yards further on the tracks told us that the lions had stopped. They, too, had heard the cattle gongs and they knew exactly what they were. To the lions they were dinner gongs, signalling that dinner was awaiting.

All this told us that we were, by then, only 50 yards behind our quarry.

The lions made a right-angled turn and loped off again, running in the direction of the clanging gongs.

We heard the lions take one of the cows. There was the sound of them growling and wrestling with the beast as they pulled it to the ground. There was also the sound of several gongs ringing wildly as the other cattle scattered and ran away.

We had lost some ground. At that point the lions were about 150 yards ahead of us. The growling continued.

I ran past Ben flicking my rifle's safety catch off. I had no longer any need of Ben's expert tracking services. The lions' growls led me directly to my quarry.

I slowed down as the distance shortened, and was walking fast but silently through the teak forest when I came upon them. The lions were too occupied with their work to notice me sneaking through the undergrowth. The bush was thick under the teak trees which required that I approach very close.

At just 15 yards range I had all three lions in full view. They had their heads down on the cow that they were still busy killing. One held it by the throat. The other two were busy pulling chunks of meat from its body and they guzzled the hot flesh ravenously.

All three were young males with scruffy blonde manes - nomads that had been evicted from the nearby national park.

My bullet took one lion behind the shoulder. It reared up, bewildered, and began fighting the pain of its injury. The other two exploded away from the carcass and were quickly swallowed up by the undergrowth, leaving me no time to put in a second shot.

There was a blank look in the yellow eyes of the animal I had hit. It staggered around, flopping over and getting up again, repeatedly. Finally it fell over and lay on its side. I stood over it until it stopped breathing.

The other two were gone.

Assisted by the local people, we searched for the tracks of the two fugitive lions for the next three days. There were no fresh lion tracks anywhere. They had probably, therefore, high-tailed it back into the game reserve which was only 10 miles down the road from Salankomo.

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The Mujere Man-eaters

Binga in 1965 was a very remote part of Rhodesia. The district is located on the south upper shores of Lake Kariba which had filled to capacity for the first time in 1963. Fourteen thousand primitive Batonka people - of the 57 000 that had been forced to move from their ancestral homes in the lake basin - had settled in the Binga hinterland away from the lake shore. By 1965, however, a few families had begun commercially fishing the lake, with gill nets, in the Mujere area - where the waters were shallow.

The Batonka, in those days, were a primitive iron-age people. Their sleeping huts were erected on pole platforms (ngalaans) 10 feet above the ground. The open pole floors of these huts allowed smoke, from smouldering fires beneath them, to filter into the sleeping quarters at night which kept the mosquitoes at bay.

Access to the ngalaan platforms was by way of fixed sloping pole ladders.

There were several ngalaans in the lakeshore Mujere fishing camps; and there were many more, not far away inland, in the village lines of the Batonka Tribal Trust Land reservations. All these scattered hamlets had many pole-and-dagga thatched huts built directly on the ground, too - but none of these were sleeping huts.

This entire zone - flanked in the west by the completely undeveloped Chete Game Reserve, to the north by the shores of Lake Kariba, and in the east by the Sengwa River - was called Sizemba. The Sengwa River was the boundary between the Binga and Kariba districts.

Far away to the south, in the Nabusenga River Valley, was a dense complex of Batonka kraals in a broad swath running west to east. This area was called Siabuwa.

The 50 mile wide belt of country between Sizemba and Siabuwa was a mass of inhospitable rugged hills and narrow valleys, served by only a few small springs. It was called '*The Ngondwe*'. Here arable soils occurred in only a few tiny pockets which, nevertheless, supported a smattering of isolated family villages.

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Sometime in late January of 1965 an old lioness, and her three big cubs, left the Chete Game Reserve and, travelling east, they settled in the Ngondwe. The mother's teeth were broken and she was well past her prime. Two of the cubs were young males - bigger than their mother. The third was a young lioness. The old girl, finding it ever more difficult to catch wild animals, took to killing and eating people.

Initially, the killings were accepted by the local people as a normal part of Batonka life. This was primitive Africa; and surviving family members continued with their lives as though nothing had happened.

For a long time, outsiders did not know what was going on in the Ngondwe. People set off from their village in the morning with the stated intention of visiting relatives nearby - and they simply disappeared. The four lions left few remains - which, in any case, were quickly devoured by the ubiquitous hyenas.

Months later, I tried to piece together the adventures of this small family of lions but found it impossible to determine exactly how many people they had eaten. What I did learn was that they had lived amongst the Ngondwe villages for maybe six weeks before they moved on to Sizemba.

It was only when they started killing and eating people in the villages of Chiefs Sinamsanga and Siamupa at Sizemba, that rumours filtered back to the District Commissioner at Binga that there was a man-eating lion on the loose. But Sizemba was 100 miles from Binga and no Batonka man was inclined to walk that distance for no reward. So the DC sent one of his trusted native messengers - Siamweri - down to Mujere to find out what was going on. It was Siamweri who raised the alarm and I was called in to eliminate the lions.

I had just returned from dealing with the man-eaters at Salankomo.

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At Mujere, the lions perfected a technique that assured them of a constant supply of people to eat. At night they would climb a ladder onto one of the ngalaan platforms. They pushed the plank door of the sleeping hut open,

entered, selected a victim, and hauled him or her to the ground. And there, in the middle of the village, they had their meal.

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I took two Bushman trackers with me to Sizemba, Ben and Mbuyotsi. The three of us were an excellent hunting team.

We arrived at Mujere after dark and set up camp on the wide open lake shoreline. A small hut had been constructed near the water to house spare fuel for the DC when he visited on patrol. A small metal fishing boat was chained to the outside wall of the hut.

We maneuvered the two 44 gallon petrol drums out of the hut and commandeered it as our nocturnal refuge.

The hut was tiny. It had open mopani pole walls and a roughly constructed thatch roof. There was no door. We parked the Land Rover next to the hut and, after unloading our camping gear into it, we arranged the two petrol drums as a barrier in front of the open doorway. The three of us slept inside the hut.

Early the next morning I shot a zebra and two impala for bait. We dropped them off at strategic places - in areas where the Mujere fishermen told us lion tracks had been most frequently seen. We wired the carcasses to the bases of stout trees and covered them in heavy-leafed branches - to hide them from eagles and vultures during the day.

We were back at our little hut-camp just after midday - covered in blood and reeking of guts and gore. We pushed and pulled the D.C.'s little metal boat onto the water and paddled it out some 300 yards from the shore. We judged that distance to be far enough away from any crocodile that might be lurking in the shallows.

The three of us dived into the lake to wet our naked bodies. Then we climbed back on board to soap ourselves. Finally, we dived back into the water to rinse off the soap-suds.

Whilst this was going on, we watched a makoro (dugout canoe) making its way laboriously across the bay. It came from the Irvin & Johnson-sponsored fishing camp located at the end of the long and narrow Chipampa peninsula.

We waved at the lone boatman. He waved back.

He beached his makoro not far from our little hut, and lifted a large cloth bundle from the boat, hitching it over his shoulder. He then made his way across the 200 yards of open shore next to our hut, and disappeared into the mopani tree line beyond.

We watched desultorily and without comment. There was nothing extraordinary about the event, the likes of which we had seen many times.

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That evening we returned to the bait carcasses. The thermals had by then died away with the lowering of the sun. The eagles and vultures, we knew, would already be settled on their nocturnal roost sites. So it was safe to open up and poison the baits.

We removed the leafy branches and, with a pen-knife, I exposed several sites on the carcasses where I knew lions preferred to start their meals, and I loaded them with liberal doses of strychnine.

I hate using poisons - especially strychnine which is terribly painful - but when dealing with serial man-eating lions any means to kill them was justified!

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That night I slept like the dead. I woke up at dawn to the strident call of a fish eagle that flew low over our hut on its early morning lakeshore patrol.

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We found a dead hyena on one of the baits. Collateral damage! It made me sad and melancholy - but I had to accept that sometimes these things happen. We burned the hyena on a bonfire of dead logs and re-covered the baits with the leafy branches. Burning the hyena was essential - obligatory - to avoid secondary poisoning which would happen if some other scavenger ate it.

We returned to our hut-camp around midday where a delegation of village elders awaited me. *"Johnny, the village tailor, is missing,"* they told me. *"He visited the Chipampa fishing camp yesterday,"* they said, *"and he had come back with a bundle of clothes to mend. That is his makoro... There on*

the lake shore,” they said, pointing to the old dugout canoe rocking quietly on the waves.

A cold shiver ran down my spine. The man we had seen crossing the lake the previous afternoon had been Johnny the Tailor.

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Ben, Mbuyotsi and I walked to the place on the edge of the woodland where we had last seen the tailor. We followed his tracks 50 yards into the trees and found his remains. The lions had been resting in the shade there, right alongside our camp, the whole of that day. They must have killed the tailor even before we had paddled our boat back to the shore.

All the lions had left of him was the dome of his skull; the bridge of his top teeth; his bottom jaw licked clean of all flesh but with the teeth intact; sundry large bones with the ends chewed off; and two finger-sized pieces of rib held together with some connective tissue. Unusually for a Batonka, the tailor had been wearing shoes from which the lions had eaten all the leather tops. The rubber soles, however, had been chewed and discarded.

The spoor was one day old but I urged Ben to take up the tracks. We discovered that the lions had travelled along the edge of the woodland, skirting the lake shore, eastward towards the Sengwa River estuary. I had a feeling that we might cut fresh tracks when following the old spoor - and that is exactly what happened. By four o'clock Ben was on to that morning's tracks. The lions were then on their way back to Mujere.

The spoor led us into a pocket of very dense jesse - the infamous heavy thicket of the Zambezi Valley. There they had gone to ground. The substrate was sandy/gravel. The terrain was broken with convoluted depressions filled with back-waters from the lake, all covered by a thick green blanket of floating Kariba weed.

The lions were watching us. One of them gave vent to a slow and guttural growl. It raised the hackles on my neck and the hairs on my arms stood instantly erect. Quivers ran up and down my spine.

Suddenly, all hell broke loose.

The lioness, roaring loudly, broke cover and rushed at me from a range of no

more than 20 yards. The butt of my .458 Magnum hit my shoulder. The stock came up to my cheek. My eye found the front and back sights already lined up. The raging animal was coming at me full tilt, down a very steep slope.

I touched the trigger. The rifle kicked against my shoulder and the solid 500 gr bullet hit the lioness in the neck behind the head. The bullet raked down and through its vital chest organs. It died instantly and hit the ground without a sound.

One of the young males ran out, chuntering loudly. My next bullet hit it in the chest - punching it backwards. It cowered in front of me for a second or two. Then it disappeared back into the thicket before I could give it a second shot.

The three of us stood our ground silently... waiting... listening. Not a sound came out of the heavy undergrowth but we knew two unwounded lions were still in there. What had become of the young lion I had just hit I couldn't say.

I took the two spare rounds that Ben proffered and silently recharged my weapon. With four cartridges in the rifle again I felt much more comfortable.

In the distance we heard the two surviving lions plunging into water. They were panicking to get away. We all charged off into the jesse and raced after them.

Not far inside the thicket we ran past the body of the second lion I had shot. Two down... two to go!

We burst out of the jesse on the far side and looked down over a 30 yard wide channel of water that was thickly covered in Kariba weed. Midway across, the two lions were laboriously ploughing their way through the dense aquatic foliage. I picked up my rifle and aimed at the bigger of the two cats - placing my bead onto the back of its head.

"Aikona, Nkosi," Ben cautioned me. "Don't shoot them now.... in the middle of the channel. Let them crawl out on the other side and shoot them just as they get onto dry land."

I looked at Ben and grinned. If I shot them in the middle of the channel it

would be Ben and Mbuyotsi who would have had to wade in to recover the bodies - diving down under the Kariba weed - groping for the bodies of the dead lions lying on the bottom. And there were huge crocodiles in all of these back waters!

I laughed at the thought.

Ben grinned back at me and nodded his head. We were both on the same page! It was sound advice he had given me. He was looking after his own skin!

I shot both the lions just as Ben had suggested - at 30 yards range - as they climbed out of the water on the other side. They were sitting ducks.

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Later that evening, in the light of the Land Rover's headlamps, Ben and Mbuyotsi skinned all four lions and wrapped their hides up in coarse salt. Then Mbuyotsi opened their stomachs. He was looking for human remains - to confirm that we had killed the man-eaters. He found pieces of a white airtex vest and blue shirt material. This is what Johnny the Tailor had been wearing when the lions had killed him. Delving with his bare hands still further into stinking mess, he lifted out a two shilling piece that was coated in stomach juice.

He quietly placed the coin in the palm of my hand. "*The lioness has left you a tip,*" he said laconically - his eyes sparkling in mirth.

I did enjoy Mbuyotsi's sense of humour!

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To my readers: *I invite you to rate the pleasure you obtained from reading this mini-book (Volume 7) on a scale of 1 - 5.*

Additionally, I invite you to register your email address with me if you would like to communicate with me directly and/or if you would like to receive a quarterly newsletter advising you of the progress and direction this mini book series will be taking in the months/years ahead. Your opinions could well modify the way these essays are written and/or presented - even their content!

My email address is: magron@ripplesoft.co.za.

Thanking you in anticipation.

Ron Thomson