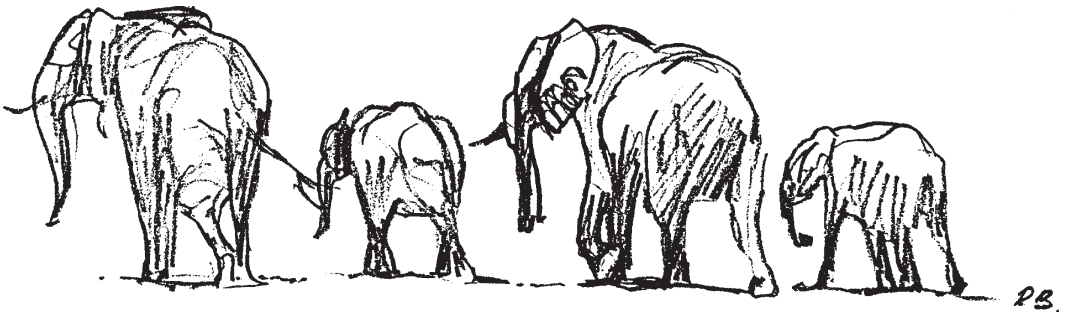
Chapter 11



GHOST OF THE FOREST (1960)

The Pygmies of the Bangui River country called it a *boruya*, and so it was. In the language of the Pygmy people of the Congo rain forest, *boruya* means ghost. This ghost, the Pygmies told me, lived in the Big Forest and wore horns on his head. Furthermore, the Pygmies stated with conviction, the *boruya* could not be killed.

I reasoned that if the thing had horns, it was an animal and not a ghost. In the Congo rain forest it could only be a bongo. It took me two weeks and a walk of three hundred miles to find out that I was dead wrong.

Jean Bepoix, our French guide in Equatorial Africa, had promised to show us a bongo. The forest-dwelling bongo is perhaps the most difficult animal in all of Africa for a sportsman to bag. Though the bongo is the Beau Brummell of the animal world, his dark red coloring and white stripes blend in well with the shadows of the forest places where this rare antelope lives. There are few sportsmen who can boast of having a bongo in their trophy collection. I wanted to be one of those.

Furthermore, Bepoix told me, as we drove southward from Fort Archambault in French Equatorial Africa to the Bangui River, that he had found, on his last trip into the Big Forest, a village of Pygmies who knew all the game in the area. Bepoix had not actually seen the Pygmy village, as it was a three-day walk from the nearest road, but he had talked to two of the Pygmies from the village. Pygmies are hunters and not farmers like the larger-bodied forest Negroes of the same area. The Pygmies know the rain forest and the game within it like the palms of their wizened little hands.

Under the African Sun

It sounded like a good bet for bongo, especially as two of my friends had already bagged bongo along the Ubangi River. If we could persuade the Pygmies to go with us into the country of the *boruya*, finding a bongo would be a cinch.

Jean Bepoix and I gathered what equipment we needed for a two-week walking safari. In Jean's old power wagon we headed east from the town of Bangui along the road to Aguifendi. This area, now called the Central African Republic, was, before 1960, a part of southern French Equatorial Africa. The countryside is covered with dense jungle growth very much like the Belgian Congo, which lies just across the river. The road we traveled, however, angled away from the river proper and headed easterly through the fringes of the rain forest toward the Ouarra River, where only the small side streams are flanked by belts of jungle growth. This kind of country is called "gallery forest."

We stopped at the village of Baranda, where the forest Negroes, under French supervision, had planted large banana plantations. This was as far as we could go by car. We paid a citizen of Baranda to watch our vehicle and hired fifteen other Barandians to serve as porters for a march southward into the jungle country.

This time of year, the middle of April, was, as Jean called it, "Zee dry season." It rained regularly every night and quite often during the day as well. The long, palm-thatched houses of the forest Negroes simply break up the larger drops of water and filter them in a fine, exasperating spray over the occupants within. After our first night in Baranda, we were never dry for the rest of the trip.

But wet as we were, it was exciting to start southward the next morning on a walking safari. As the line of porters with loads of equipment on their heads straggled out behind us, I felt like Livingstone penetrating the inner recesses of the Dark Continent. We followed a narrow trail through the wet grass of a big savanna between the arms of the gallery forest below Baranda. When we entered the jungle itself on the same narrow trail, the early morning sun was blotted out as though by an eclipse. We never crossed another savanna or saw the sun clearly again. Furthermore, my enthusiasm for the walking safari was considerably diminished by the time we had walked eight hours without stopping to eat or rest. As I was carrying nothing except my rifle, I could not complain. Most of our grinning porters were carrying fifty pounds or more apiece. It

developed that our goal for our first day's march was a new plantation of the forest Negroes some thirty-five miles within the rain forest. Here a few families from Baranda had begun to clear the trees and plant bananas. The major attraction, if there was any attraction in that dank and dark place, was a large grove of oil-nut palms. The forest Negroes roast the datelike nuts of this palm to eat, and they also collect them for the oil they contain.

As we arrived at this outpost of no civilization at all, I just had strength enough to ask Bepoix how we were going to meet our Pygmy guides. He had already explained that the Pygmy village was two days' march beyond Little Baranda, as they called the clearing in the forest. "Zey send for zee Babingas when we leave zee road," Jean explained.

I went to sleep with the rain dripping in my face, trying to figure out how any human could go one hundred miles on foot through the forest trails when we had just gone thirty or so. Through the roar of the tropical rain on the thatched roof, I heard the boom of thunder; it seemed to have a regular rhythm and cadence. "Zee drums," Jean mumbled in the dark beside me. "Zey tell that we come safe to Little Baranda."

Talking drums! So that was the way! In the morning I examined the telegraphic apparatus of the forest blacks. The drum, a large hollow log with a slit along its upper side, was suspended horizontally on two sharp stones. The telegraph operator sat astride the drum and beat it with a large stick wrapped with skin. That same morning, the two Pygmy guides, Hota and Borgu, appeared. The message had been relayed to them by intermediate drums when we left the road.

First the porters held a ceremony over my Weatherby rifle to make sure that the bullet would be effective against a *boruya*. They danced around the gun, yelling "Bump-bumpa" and pushing good luck into the barrel so that it could not miss. As I had made a couple of spectacular misses in the previous two-months' hunt in French Equatorial Africa, I was all for this.

While the porters were sorting loads and eliminating every unnecessary item, Bepoix was questioning the Pygmies through an interpreter. He asked them especially about the *boruya*, the ghost of the forest. The two Pygmies nodded solemnly as they heard the word *boruya*, and pointed behind them toward the solid walls of trees. "Yes, the *boruya* lives there. He has twisted horns and cannot be killed. He has never been killed."

I saw one of the Pygmies carrying a knife suspended by a bandoleer of red hide marked with white stripes. That strip of skin could only have come from a bongo. And yet these two little fellows had just said that the ghost of the forest cannot be killed. Something was very wrong here. Perhaps the Pygmies were not telling all that they knew. Maybe they were treacherous and deceitful.

I could not have been more wrong about the two Pygmy guides, Hota and Borgu, who took us next morning into the great rain forest to the south. After several days, I found that these two diminutive men were quiet, soft-spoken, and capable. Although we could not speak a word of any mutual language, I grew to know them very well and to like them immensely. Our Pygmy guides were so thoroughly at home in the great rain forest that they seemed a part of the animal life there. Curiously enough, the six forest blacks who had somewhat reluctantly agreed to accompany us on the hunt as porters were lost once they left the clearings of their banana plantations and the trails between them.

The great rain forest is like a damp cellar. The ribbed trunks of the trees tower so far overhead that their tops are lost in the green gloom of the canopy of vegetation. Trailing lianas hang out of the semi-obscurity from the tree limbs far above. The forest floor itself is in eternal darkness. Here and there younger trees and bushes struggle for a single spot of sunlight that might give them strength enough to compete with their neighbors. The silent twilight of the great forest is marked only by the steady drip of water and the occasional cry of a hornbill in the crowns of the trees above.

One of the queerest effects of the forest is the loss of a sense of direction. The faint light that filters down through the millions of glossy leaves overhead gives little indication of the whereabouts of the sun. There are no landmarks. I was astounded to find that the forest black were as easily confused about directions as myself. But the Pygmies never were. Whether we were on elephant trails or walking through the forest with no sign of a trail, our two Pygmy guides took us unerringly and directly to any spot.

Curiously enough, one of our major problems was water in that dank forest. We were, so Bepoix told me, approximately fifty miles from the nearest stream. There were, however, shallow depressions in the forest floor that filled with water during the rainy season. As it continued to rain every night during our stay, I made a mental

note that I never wanted to see the rainy season if this was their idea of a dry period. My thin bed soon was slimy with mildew. My mosquito netting fell apart in gray patches. The big brown-winged mosquitoes that appeared at nightfall could sail through without folding their wings. As usual, our two Pygmies were the only sensible ones. When we camped, they constructed a low platform of small branches on which they slept. Beneath, they put a smoldering punk log. The smoke kept the mosquitoes at bay. To keep off the rain, they pulled a covering of enormous leaves over their faces and shoulders.

From Little Baranda, we marched for two days, in a generally southward direction, to a deserted Pygmy village in the forest. As we slogged into the little clearing beneath the trees, we could still see the decaying sleeping platforms the Pygmies had built there and the framework of two domed huts they had used for more permanent shelter. Near the old Pygmy camping place was a depression in the forest floor as big as a city lot and half filled with green, slime-coated water. As we approached the spot, a number of brown tree ducks flew up and perched on the limbs of the dead trees in the middle of the pond. We brushed the scum aside and filled our canteens.

There certainly were bongo in the vicinity of the old Pygmy village. If I needed any further proof, the moldering skull and horns of a bongo bull that I found in the Pygmy camp furnished it. Our two Pygmies were armed with tiny bows and arrows and long-shafted spears. If they could get a bongo with that equipment, I certainly ought to be able to shoot one with a rifle.

It was typical of the Pygmies that they did not argue when Bepoix said that the *boruya* was a bongo. When I told the interpreter to tell our two little guides that I wanted a bongo very badly, the interpreter did not use *boruya*. He used a different word that means bongo in the Babinga language. But no one seemed to wonder about this.

The first morning of hunting we found the tracks of a bongo bull two or three miles from the deserted Pygmy village. As it had rained the night before, the tracks in the mud were obviously burning fresh. With one of the Pygmies in front of me as a tracker, I tiptoed along on the sodden forest floor straining for the first view of the quarry. Four of the forest Negroes, who had come along with us to carry water bottles and lunch, trailed behind. I was amazed at how much noise these porters made as they slogged through the mud. I finally told Bepoix to order them to hang back a hundred yards so that we would have a thin chance of getting up

to the bongo bull. I had learned before how keen-eared a bongo can be. Our second Pygmy guide simply faded off into the trees at the side of the trail and was gone.

We tracked the bongo where the animal had fed early that morning. He had nibbled on some pale green shoots of a three-leafed plant that grew in little clumps on the forest floor. Hota tested the juice from the severed stems. The fluid was still fresh and sticky. The bongo was just ahead. The tracks of the bongo bull straightened from his zigzag course. The imprints in the mud led toward a moss-covered log on the forest floor. Stepping as daintily as pouter pigeons, Hota and I rounded the upturned roots of the dead forest giant. There was a sudden rush of sound in the stillness. A sapling snapped. Hoofs pounded on the mud. Then the silence closed in again. We found the bongo bed just on the other side of the log. We had been no more than fifteen feet away when the animal jumped up and sprinted for safety. I grinned a sickly grin at Hota. He solemnly motioned me on. We would try again.

Late in the morning we stopped for a rest and an unappetizing lunch. In the last four hours of steady tracking, we had jumped the bongo three times. We had never so much as seen a patch of red hide in the gloom between the trees. I was wet and frankly discouraged. I had been through this kind of bongo hunting before.

While we ate our slimy sandwiches, the other Pygmy, Borgu, appeared among us. He came as silently as he had gone. He carried on his back a little knapsack made of leaves with carrying straps manufactured from vines. The package contained large land snails, some kind of bulb that he had dug up, and the carcass of a small squirrel-like rodent that I had never seen before. In all of the later days of the hunt, whenever one Pygmy guide was tracking for us, the other was off foraging. How the food gatherer could find us in that vast place was a continual mystery. I was constantly impressed by the differences between the Pygmies and the forest Negroes: The Pygmies were completely at home in the forest; the agricultural blacks were ill at ease as soon as they left their *shambas*.

In the afternoon we found the tracks of another lone bongo bull. We had already crossed the tracks of two or three groups of female bongo with young. There had been another single track of an animal with enormously elongated hoofs. I thought that it might be the track of the rare okapi, since I had never seen an okapi track. When Jean

asked the Pygmies about this, they shook their heads and pointed southward. We decided to have one more try at a bongo, since the track looked very fresh, as if the animal had begun to feed early in the afternoon. The track led us in a few minutes into a half-open clearing. This was one of the depressions that hold water in the rainy season. Although it was now dry, we could see on the boles of the trees where the water had stood six or eight feet deep some months before. The standing water had killed a few trees so that a little sunlight filtered through. Where the pond had been, the ground was covered with the three-leafed plant that the bongo like. This bongo bull had apparently left his bed to feed in the clearing. His tracks were everywhere. Some of the pale green weeds growing in the pond bed had been nibbled off only minutes before. It took one of the Pygmies perhaps thirty minutes to find where the bongo had left the weed patch and returned to the forest. The tracks led straight to a blowdown of trees where some gale of long ago had uprooted four or five forest giants and laid them in a pile. Other trees and saplings had long since reached up to use the precious sunlight in the vacant place. Some large trees grew on the bodies of the fallen.

Hota, who was in the lead, held up his hand for me to stop. He looked at the fallen trees for five minutes. Then he cautiously moved a few steps to the side and stopped again. He held up his nose and sniffed the wind like a hunting hound. Hota was scenting like a wild animal for the body odor of the bongo. He looked back at me. I could not tell from his expression whether he had smelled the bongo or not, but he seemed confident. He crawled to the right and crouched again, testing the wind. Then he pointed with his hand held close to his body. There was a dark space between two of the fallen trees. A few ferns grew there. Behind the fallen trunks was dark shadow—nothing more. The Pygmy motioned me forward. I crawled behind him and looked over his shoulder. There was nothing.

Suddenly the shadows moved. There was a rush of motion behind the fallen trees. Frantically I threw the gun to my shoulder and shot at the movement. A bright splinter of wood jumped from the side of one of the trees. Even as the thing ran, I could not make out the form or the color of the animal. The bongo was gone.

After this bitter disappointment, it was too late to get back to our camp in the deserted Pygmy village. Bepoix and I split a can of sardines between us and slept sitting up against the bole of a tree. Our four porters were equally miserable as the big brown mosquitoes droned

back and forth. The two Pygmies, as usual, dined well and slept well on their little platforms, which they constructed in a few minutes. I finally spent half the night making a sleeping platform for myself. I abandoned it after one try. Lying on those raw poles was like sleeping on a set of broken springs without any mattress.

Our first day of bongo hunting was a good sample of the week that followed. The bongo were present but elusive. Twice the Pygmies smelled or saw bongo ahead. I never so much as got a glimpse of a tail or a horn.

The continued dampness was making me sick. My skin began to feel like the epidermis of a toad. I had never heard that mildew can grow on a human, but in the rain forest I think it is possible. Even Bepoix was silent and moody. He had lived a good part of his life on the edge of the great forest, although only once before had he penetrated so far to the southeast. Furthermore, Jean had run out of cigarettes and we were both just about out of food. Three of our porters had deserted us. We wondered if these forest blacks would be able to find their way back to Baranda. At the time, we didn't much care.

Only the two Pygmies, Hota and Borgu, seemed to be undiscouraged, and well fed. The clammy gloom of the rain forest seemed to be a natural background for their taciturn dispositions. Nor were they downhearted that we had not yet bagged a bongo—or even seen one, for that matter. We would try again, Hota said in his quiet way. He knew where there was another forest pond about a five-hour walk to the southeast. We would try there in the morning. Neither Bepoix nor I was particularly enthusiastic. We were so leg-weary that a five-hour march to this new spot appalled us. And what difference did direction make? The country was the same no matter where we went.

We started out the next morning a dispirited and silent crew. As usual, Borgu disappeared into the forest at the side of the elephant trail an hour after we had started. Our three remaining porters carried what was left of our equipment; it amounted only to our moldering beds and what was left of our mildewed tent. Jean was down to his last jug of wine, and there were two cans of bully beef remaining. We were going to have a thin and hungry time getting back to the road.

The two Pygmies took us unerringly through twelve or fifteen miles of forest without ever so much as following an elephant trail. We had

started off as the first dim daylight filtered down through the great trees. About noon, we saw ahead a lighter patch of shadow, which was the forest pond. The two Pygmies could not have taken us straighter to this remote spot if they had used radar. But the Pygmies and their forest ways seemed destined to failure anyhow. The pond itself was almost dry. What water there was looked like a bright green rug and was about the same size. As we stepped up to the edge, a half-dozen brown ducks spurted up from the slime-coated puddle and circled among the trees.

Around the edge of the scummy pond were a few old bongo tracks. There was nothing fresh enough to follow. A bongo bull had been nibbling on some weeds growing at the edge of the water a day or two before. We had come all of this distance for nothing.

Hota, as usual, was testing the wind with his nose. I was accustomed to the Pygmies' scenting like hunting hounds. It no longer seemed strange. This time Hota crouched and ran around the edge of the pond like a beagle. Borgu followed him closely. The two put their heads together but spoke no words—both of them testing the wind. A very faint breeze blew through the dead trees in the middle of the clearing. The brown ducks sat above us on some bare limbs and looked down stupidly. Jean motioned the three porters to sit down. They collapsed. We followed the two Pygmies in a half circuit around the pond. Hota and Borgu were standing behind the bole of a gigantic tree. They looked around the curve of the trunk and then shrank back. "*Boruya*!" Hota whispered beneath his breath and pointed. I looked where he pointed. There was nothing—only the great trunks of the trees growing thicker on the far side of the pond. There was no bongo, no life, nothing.

"Jean," I said half aloud, "these damn Pygmies can see . . ."

When over beyond the pond a brown something moved among the trees. There was another, and another. I could hear a rustling on the sodden leaves. Automatically I threw my rifle to my shoulder and followed the movement of the running forms. There was a pair of horns zigzagging through the shadows. Just behind was another set. I could see the ivory tips of the horns as they appeared and disappeared among the trees. Through the telescopic sight of the rifle I could see the brown shoulder of the biggest bull. I jerked the trigger savagely.

The clap of the shot sent the tree ducks spiraling into the air with unducklike shrieks. The two Pygmies disappeared as though an invisible force had jerked them from behind the big tree. Jean and I ran forward. He was muttering something in French and pounding me on the back. *"C'est bon, ça. Vous avez tué un bongo."*

There on the dry leaves lay an animal. But it was not a bongo. The lyrate horns might have fit a bongo, but the brown hide with the white-spotted markings was a far cry from the red and white-striped bongo I had expected. The hoofs of this curious animal were shaped like skis and were almost as long.

"Why, it's a sitatunga!" I said incredulously. "A sitatunga in the Big Forest. It can't be!"

It was indeed a sitatunga. But not an ordinary one, if any sitatunga can be described as ordinary. The African sitatunga lives in vast swamps such as papyrus-bordered lakes or the great Sudd swamp of the Upper Nile. I had already shot a sitatunga in the swamps of western Tanganyika. So the ghost animal of the Pygmies was a forest sitatunga. We had been after a rare bongo. This animal was rarer still.

We found out later that the British, fifty years before, had described a new species of forest sitatunga that lived in the southern Sudan, but they had never been able to get a complete specimen. Certainly the one we bagged so accidentally was not an isolated animal, since there were at least six sitatunga in the group we had encountered by that remote pond.

We had some very bad moments during the rest of the day when we thought our two Pygmies had deserted us. We were extremely dubious if we could find our way out of the big forest without them. They joined us as silently as ghosts late in the afternoon. They would not touch the animal we carried, or even look at it. I noticed also that they would not look at me or come close to my gun. The ghost of the forest had been killed. This could only be done by very powerful magic. As for myself, I thought it was sheer unadulterated luck.