

# The Second hand



## *Inheriting Someone Else's Wounded Lion Is No Way To Enjoy A Long Life.*

By Peter Hathaway Capstick

I adjusted the squelch dial on the SSB radio, dust-dirty thumb on the transmit toggle of the microphone, listening to the hollow voice of the Chief Game Officer 150 miles down the valley. Bloody hell, but how I hated that radio. In itself, that didn't make much sense as it was the only link to the dream world where water runs through a pipe uncontaminated by snail flakes, where there are mattressed beds, marbled beef steaks, girls — that smelled good and giggled. To

be fair, it wasn't only the radio. Sometimes big trouble came by sweating runner, frightened boy or just by being in the wrong place at the right time. But, mostly, it was that damn radio.

I never had it on more than I could help, and in the dry season, it just sat on a high stump under a small thatched cover to prevent the sun from melting it into slag. Red and black alligator-clamped leads snarled their way to my hunting car's battery when I had a "sched,"

and at least there was always a great laugh to be had when a newly assigned game guard was asked to "steady" the naked wire when I transmitted. When I pressed the my-turn button to broadcast, that antenna practically glowed, although I am sufficiently Man Primeval to have never bothered to ask why. I loathe two-way radios, taxes and politics, approximately in that order. But when you're a game control officer in Zambia's Northern and Eastern Provinces, you realize that the SSB is just a fact of life. Or death. You listen up. Very

# Lion



closely.

Taking a despairing toss of the plastic "glass" of lukewarm scotch, I stared at the beady, impersonal dial-eyes and dull casing of the unit as the voice droned on as if coming from the other end of a sewer.

"... So it crossed the river into the reserve, and you'll just have to head down there and take care of it. Roger? Over."

I figured I'd better cover my wool-gathering. "Ahhmm, Sir, I had some, er, reception difficulties with the earlier portion of your message. Would you repeat the essentials, please? Over."

My thumb relaxed, and the toggle sprang back to receive. That's it. Be firm. Professional. I sensed an exasperated official sigh on the

other end before the speaker crackled again.

"I said that Hanson, down at Imvubu Camp, has lost a wounded lion that crossed the river into the reserve. You know that nobody is permitted in there except Game Department personnel. You must go down to Imvubu, find out the details and follow up the lion before he bumps into somebody or turns man-eater. Do you understand? Over." Click.

Oh, brother, did I ever understand. The safari concession area, leased by the government to a private outfitting firm, bordered the Northern Luangwa Game Reserve, separated only by the Luangwa River. Along the hundred-odd miles of the length of the concession were

seven or eight camps conducting safaris. In fact, one of them had once been mine before joining the Game Department in a moment of impetuous idiocy that I believed would spawn a Great African Novel. I could go back to the States and have a Park Avenue penthouse and a Spanish castle like Bob Ruark, or maybe take a crack at Papa's daiquiri record between depositing all those filthy, capitalistic royalties. Instead, I had cornered the local market on ringworms and indigestion. Over the past couple of seasons, except for a couple of rip-roaring leaves to Lusaka, I was forced to the conclusion that I was not on Kismet's preferred list. Lots of things tried to bite me. My hair

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didn't silver majestically at the temples like Stewart Granger's; it just sort of fell out in clumps from time to time. I developed no resemblance to Clark Gable whatever, and I must presume that Grace Kelly was spending all her time in gorilla country as the gentle gender of my persuasion was about as rare as pay raises. Still, it beat the 7:17 A.M. from Mountain Station to the Hoboken Tubes all hollow. This was a tough and sometimes hairy existence, but that life was really scary.

Well, back to the Heroic Deeds Department. That's me, Boy Paladin. Maidens Rescued, Dragons Slain, Philistines Smitten. Grails Recovered Reasonably. We also deal in other people's wounded lions, by appointment only. Major Credit Cards. In Manhattan dial P-R-E-D-A-T-O-R. Out of town, call collect. Get a grip on yourself, boy. Press the talk button and tell the nice man you understand. But don't tell him what you think of the idea. You might get sent back to Wall Street for 30-to-life.

"Roger, Chief, I've got it. I'll leave in the morning. Roger that? Over."

"Officer Capstick." (Look out, here it comes.) "I have told you not to call me 'chief.' Further, that is not a Roger. You will leave tonight. As you Yanks say, 'as in now.' Acknowledge. Over."

"Affirmative, ch . . . , uh, Sir. Packing my *katandu* now. Will contact you upon my return. Over and out."

"Headquarters out." Click. Hisssss.

It was almost midnight under a drifting, tarnished coin of moon when I saw the first pressure lamps of George Hanson's camp flashing like an insane Morse code through the gnarled hardwoods along the river. I parked the Rover next to his Toyota Land Cruiser and saw George walking toward me from the campfire with one of his men, who hustled my rifle and light baggage

off to a client hut. My gunbearer Silent disappeared into the silver-tinged darkness toward the gunbearers' hut, his sleeping mat and blanket over his shoulder. I shook hands with George and shot him a zinger. We were old friends, having done several four-client safaris together in the past, and I knew how embarrassed he would be over having lost a lion.

Over a nightcap with his client, a lawyer from Chicago, George told me what had happened. They had stalked a bait they had hung after cutting some impressive tracks. Sure enough, at first light they spotted the lion and two lionesses sauntering away for a drink and a snooze after feeding. The client fired but clipped the male a bit too far back. It reared in the air, biting at its flank, then streaked off into heavy cover before George could stick in a finisher.

George topped up our snifters and stirred the blue licks of mopane wood fire into hungry tongues of red. Below us, the honking of a pair of hippos echoed hollowly up the watercourse.

"I went in after him, Pedro," said the big Rhodesian thoughtfully. "But he'd gotten a better offer. Nobody home. So I went on through the thick stuff to the river bank, and sure as rain, there was our boy just climbing out on the other side. An easy shot." He paused, lit a cigarette from the fire and glanced sideways at me. "But, then, we both know the rules, don't we?"

It was crazy, but George was right. If he'd taken the shot and anchored the lion, he would have been indisputably guilty of lion poaching as the cat was standing in the game reserve once he'd reached the far bank. No ifs, ands or buts. He surely would have been turned in by one of the camp informers for a reward, lost his professional ticket and perhaps been the guest of Zambian civil authorities in some

very sub-standard housing for six months or so. He was mighty smart not to take the shot, no matter how much trouble it would have saved me. Following procedure, he had raised the "chief," and it was now my problem. He couldn't even come with me into the reserve to follow up the wounded lion, although I knew it galled him. I assure you, America has no exclusivity of over-legislation.

Tomorrow, Silent (who technically would also be a trespasser) and I would have a look-see. Meanwhile, I stretched my carcass out between the crisp, white sheets of a real bed in the spare client hut, wondering vaguely if they'd be pulling those same sheets over my face tomorrow. If you haven't heard, wounded lions are singularly unpleasant creatures definitely inclined toward the subdivision of follow-up hunters into small, bloody chunks which can absolutely ruin your vacation. Hoping that the bullet may have, after all, proved fatal and that the cat was lying dead on the other bank, I slipped my brain into neutral and dozed off.

I awoke on the verge of a breakthrough, possibly a refinement of the Space/Time Continuum: Dawn comes faster in direct proportion to the number of brandies one drinks the night before. The blackness had evaporated in about half the time it normally takes. One of Hanson's waiters politely placed a mug of sweet, strong, milky tea on the cane top of the small table next to the bed. I swilled it, treated myself to a shower and a shave and walked over to the dining hut with its lovely river view. George was already at breakfast with his client. Pointing over a plate of eggs and — wonder of wonders — bacon, he indicated the place where the lion had crossed, about two miles straight upriver near a slow bend. Knowing the area well from previous safaris, I mentally marked a small, shallow ford within a few hundred yards of the lion's crossing and helped myself to seconds.

Checking out the .470 Nitro, Evans double rifle and switching to soft-point ammo from my customary solids, I had Silent fill a flax jaw-sack with filtered water and filched some biltong from George for lunch.

With Hanson leading the way, we returned to the site of the wounding for a look around. Hanson figured the bullet had been far enough back to cause intestinal damage, and as he is a fine pro, I took his word for it. The lion had been hit with a .458 Winchester Magnum, 510-grain soft-point which meant to me through experience that there would be no exit hole on the far side. I've seen 15 or more lions shot broadside with that bullet, and while it looks mighty good on the ballistics charts, it just won't shoot completely through a lion. The problem with the squat bullet may be that of over-expansion preventing the excess penetration so desirable. This is a great disadvantage of the load, two holes instead of one make tracking a helluva lot easier as well as causing blood-loss shock much more quickly. Sure, you can kill lions with 510-grain, .458 Mag. soft-points, but it's not the size of the hole that matters. It's where it's located.

I asked George about our wounded swain's lady friends, and he told me that they had, in the confusion of the moment, just disappeared and were not seen to have crossed the river with the old man. Of course, that didn't mean they didn't cross later. But just maybe, for once, luck was swinging my way, and we could concentrate on the male without worrying about

the girls. Back in East Africa, when lions were considered vermin, the old-timers usually shot the female first as she was the most likely to charge under most circumstances. And, I can promise you they were right, not that the male is in the least inhibited when wounded or angry or perhaps simply in the mood for a human-type turkey on rye. Like me.

I sent Silent, carrying his throwing spear (the same one, incidentally, with which I had managed to kill the Chabunkwa man-eating lion while Silent fed him an arm so I could recover from a terrific wallop gotten in a point-blank charge) to check the spoor in the softer dirt and sand at the water's edge. This way he would know and recognize the tracks when we took up the trail on the far bank. I have always, with indeterminate validity, reckoned myself a good tracker, but a glance at a set of tracks became as indelible on Silent's memory as an enlarged color photograph. He was not officially a member of the Game Department, so I paid him from my own meager wages. We had hunted together so long we hardly ever even spoke in the bush, each somehow blending his mind with the other. You don't walk away from a relationship like that; ask anybody who's spent time under fire with trusted companions.

*"Yena kona mukulu stelik,*



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Bwana," he said, which meant the lion was something of a large fellow. He wrinkled his forehead thoughtfully and lit a ferocious creation of black shag tobacco wrapped in newspaper.

"Wena zo azi lo mkondo?" I asked him teasingly. "Will you remember the spoor?"

He chuckled lowly, dragging on the half-cigarette half-bush-fire. "Like that of my youngest wife, Bwana," he answered in Fanagalo. "Now let us go like men and make an end to this play of children."

This one-upmanship was for the benefit of George's hunting staff who were minutely examining the sky and the tops of their bare, dusty feet. There is always a great rivalry among Africans who served a hunter, even to the extent that, if a really big elephant was killed and the walk back to the vehicle was 20 miles or more, they would almost come to blows deciding who would have the prestige of carrying the heaviest tusk, despite the great extra effort and work required. Pride makes a good safari crew, and Silent was regarded as almost a legend among other gunbearers.

Well, I thought, starting for the ford, might as well get going. Can't dance anyway. With desert boots hung around my neck by the laces, I crossed first, the big double ready, keeping a sharp eye for crocs in this infested water. It was only knee-deep here in the dry season, and we headed straight up the bank to the point opposite the tracks on the other side. There they were, still crisp, about 24 hours old, which tallied with the timing of the wounding. And Silent was right. The pug marks were deep and broad — a very large pussycat. I tried to picture him somewhere ahead, knowing that his mane was full and quite reddish, a fact I had discovered from George so I didn't happen into another big male and bust him by mistake. We started directly on the trail, an error I will not be likely to repeat.

Real dried blood began to show about 150 yards into the heavy riverine bush, the cat having dried off enough that the oozings were no longer diluted by the water dripping off his hide. The greenest beginner could tell that it was a gut wound and not bleeding heavily as the

bullet entrance hole was alternately covered and uncovered by the sliding action of the cat's skin as he walked. Not good. With the pain, he'd be savage as a boxcar full of honey badgers, but the big, fat slug had done nothing structurally to slow him down. Okay, now, take it cool. Just because the track looks cold doesn't mean that he isn't under the next shady bush, licking his wounds, waiting for you. Time to get serious. I sidestepped and immediately Silent passed me, hunched over, his eyes locked like a laser on the almost invisible spoor as I scanned ahead and to the sides

sional football ranks can drop a floater wide-open in the end zone of the Super Bowl. At worst, he'll lose the game and some sleepless nights. But, you can't ever drop a pass with a wounded lion. No mistakes without paying the price. And that gets extremely expensive — you don't get embarrassed, you get dead.

After two hours, we had covered about 600 yards inland from the river. Twice, the cat had stopped and bedded down, only to rise and continue again. At the last spot, in the shady lee of an elephant-damaged sausage tree, there was a fair patch of blood not much more



Back when the lions of East Africa were considered vermin, hunters usually shot females first because they were the most likely to charge. Capstick agrees but notes that a male can be just as dangerous if wounded or just in a bad mood.

trying to make visual contact before a surprise charge. There are probably more dangerous aspects to the world of big game hunting, but the following-up of gut-shot lions has got to hang in there fairly heavily simply because so many good hunters have gotten the Big Chop doing it.

I'd done it enough to know what to expect: the blinding, low rush; the hard grunts and the lash of tail; the blur of white fangs; the shock of realizing that *it was coming* and you had a second, maybe less, to place a perfect shot into the vitals of the streaking target. Goalies may let the puck or soccer ball slip past them and suffer no more than chagrin and embarrassment. The best pass receiver in the profes-

than an hour old. Silent rubbed it between his fingers and rolled his malarial eyes up at me. I jerked my chin forward and looked over the rifle, making sure the sights were clear. I gripped two extra rounds between left-hand fingers.

I was puzzled that the lion had moved so far from the heavier bush and the convenience of the water, although there was still enough low bush and grass to hide a full-blown menagerie in 10 square yards. It was getting hot now, and I don't just mean the sun. I could sense the presence of the lion almost the way one can feel a stare from across a cocktail party on the back of the neck. He was there, all right, and bloody close.

The warning snarl was as flat

and sharp as a butcher's cleaver. It came from a clump of grassy bush 30 yards in front of us. Instantly, Silent cleared my field of fire in a single, sinuous movement. He moved to my side, erect, his spear poised. I watched the spot over the wide Vee of express sights as another menacing mumble joined the first growl. Uh-oh. Not in the script. I could see tawny movement indistinctly as the lions, however many there were, flattened themselves, the volume of their threats growing. Better grab the initiative, I thought, before they take it away from you, and formed the soundless word "litye" to Silent. He glanced down, looking for something to throw. Of course, I had forgotten that there are no stones in the Luangwa Valley, but he caught my meaning and pulled out several extra rounds he was carrying for the .470 and began to lob them into the thicket. *That did it!*

The first thing I saw was the shaggy, auburn head of the big male as he cleared the cover, starting his charge. I just lowered the sights a hair and touched off at his chest, collapsing him as if he'd been hit by a thunderbolt. In the same half-second, two lionesses popped out in a semi-charge and stopped, undecided, 15 yards short. They crouched flat, their tails lashing, practically blowing off my bush shorts with their growling. They were most upset, but they didn't charge — at least not yet they didn't. African standoff. But it was now their move. And they were holding all the spades.

Interesting situation, especially if you are not there. Two very angry lionesses within leaping range and one cartridge left in the rifle. Yes, you may shoot one, but even with the years of experience, there's no way to break the rifle and reload before the other one nails you. Just too close. Maybe Silent can stick the survivor and give you enough time, but that's mighty dicey and will likely lead to a hell of a lot of stitches for somebody. There's also the red tape reports in quintuplicate as well as the inquiry if you pound anything, even in self-defense, in the reserve. Will they both charge? That's easy. They will unless they don't. Odds say yes, and together. As your brain races, one slithers

another yard closer, and you can't help but marvel at the smooth flow of incredible muscles under the rippling skin. But you'd better make up your mind right quick 'cause they look like they're gonna come.

Carefully, so slowly as to be hardly noticeable, you and Silent begin to back off. That's it. Nice and easy. See, girls? Nothing to get upset about. The growling intensifies but nothing happens. Another yard. Two more. They're bluffing, you hope. Finally, you think you have enough room to manage loading a fresh round, particularly if you can gain a large chunk of a second to confuse them. You glance at Silent again and he nods, just a twitch of the head. "Eecccynaaahhh!" you scream and boom the second barrel into the ground right between them, the bullet throwing stinging sand and dirt as you flip the locking lever to open the breech. The empties ping clear, and with almost simultaneous metallic *tonks*, fresh rounds slip home. The breech of the Evans closes with the finality and precision of a bank vault.

Oh-kaayy. Now it's your turn again. If you can't take two lionesses even in a double charge over 25 fairly open yards, especially with one already dead in the sights, you deserve whatever you get. Shouting, you start to move back toward them, one of which has done a back flip at the shot and wears an expression that plainly says that maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all. As if on signal, first one, then the other give final, sneering snarls and dash off to the side. You and Silent look at each other. *Yebo*. It was a close thing.

The wounded male is lying dead in full stride, his mouth full of blood and sandy dirt. The 500-grain Kynoch has caught him right under the chin, just as he began his first low bound. But, your private rules are never broken, and you give him another dose just to be super-sure. You pick up the cartridges Silent threw and start to piece the whole thing together.

It took about a mile of walking to sort out the spoor once we had camouflaged the body of the lion to keep the vultures off. The reason he had come so far from the river had been that the females, unbeknownst

to George or us, had also crossed during the night, but farther upstream. They had missed the male's spoor and probably called to him, which drew him out of the really thick cover and away from the water. The tracks of the two lionesses were finally located on the river bank a thousand yards upstream from the point where the male crossed. Had we really done our homework, we would have known what we had to deal with. Oh, well, live and learn. Next time we'll read between the lions. ■

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