



WHEN LIONS CHARGE

Sometimes a hunter finds swift, terrible trouble when he shoots at an African lion. Here are some hair-raising experiences

BY ALEXANDER LAKE

Illustrated by John Clymer

John Clymer

Lately it has become fashionable to characterize the African lion as a patient, bored and somewhat lazy cat. Dangerous? Why, a man can walk right up to one, practically, and snap its picture as it lolls under a tree. There seems to be a growing tendency to sneer at the king of beasts.

The thing is, lions change character instantly when they are shot at. A hunter can find himself in the most appalling jam. Suddenly.

I happen to know exactly what occurred when twenty-three men had tragic encounters with lions. Eight of these men were only mauled, but six lie buried in the cemetery at Nairobi. The graves of nine others are far scattered among the purple-and-silver silences of Africa. They all were victims of one of the six deadly shortcomings of lion hunting. Perhaps the best way to explain them is to take apart some of these tragedies.

George Grey was a scion of a noble English family. He was out after lions with Sir Alfred Pease, one of Africa's most publicized hunters. Six other men were also in the party. All were mounted. Now, a horse is slow freight compared to a lion, which when aroused is among the fastest animals on earth. Pease had warned all members of the party not to approach a lion closer than 200 yards. But Grey was overcautious: He rode after a shaggy male that was ambling off about its own business.

The lion paid no attention to the pounding hoofs behind until Grey was within ninety yards. Without warning, it whirled and charged. Ninety yards! A lion can cover this distance in a very few seconds.

Grey leaped from his horse and let off his first shot at twenty-five yards. He got off his second at five yards, using a heavy-caliber double rifle. The second shot was a flash shot, for no one can recover from the recoil of one of



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those big rifles and let off a second aimed shot that fast.

Both bullets hit, but the lion never faltered and a moment afterward it was tearing at him with claws and teeth. One minute later three of Grey's companions galloped up and each slapped a bullet into the lion from ten yards. They were close enough to have made successful brain shots, but because they were believers in the "shock treatment" they slammed their slugs into the beast's guts. Instead of slowing it down, those shots increased the lion's fury and it began mauling Grey unmercifully. Pease arrived in a rush, dismounted, placed the muzzle of his rifle against the side of the lion's head and killed it.

The tragedy began as a simple situation. The lion had been ambling away. Any man who could shoot at all could have crippled and perhaps killed the animal with a backside shot. The backside shot is one of the best. It often punctures the guts, liver, kidneys, lungs, and sometimes

gets the heart. If it's a bit off and gets a back leg, it ties the lion down. It's true that a lion can get along on three legs for awhile, but its flashing speed is gone. Hit in a back leg, it may turn at bay or head for the brush, but it won't attempt a charge until the hunter gets within leaping distance.

If the beast turns toward the hunter it's wide open for a chest shot. Aim an inch or two below the base of the throat. A lion's heart is low in its chest. Of course, you could make a head shot, but you'll probably want the head for a trophy, and it's a shame to damage it. Anyway, the head shot is a dangerous one for uncertain marksmen. Men have died because they thought there was some skull in that great mop of hair. There isn't. The lion has hardly any skull above the eyes.

Grey and his companions couldn't have made more mistakes if they'd held a conference [Continued on page 141]

When Lions Charge

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for the purpose. And Grey might be alive today if his companions hadn't slapped those three useless shots into the animal. Up to that moment, the lion was chewing away on Grey's arm and shoulder. Chances are that it was about through with its mauling, for a lion's anger ebbs quickly once its victim is down.

Even when two of the beasts put on one of their earth-shaking battles over a female, the victor's rage vanishes instantly once his opponent is whipped.

However, those three gut shots made Grey's death certain. I wonder how many men must die before sportsmen learn that you can't kill a lion with shot. And I wonder how many men must die before hunters learn the anatomies of the animals they're hunting. Learn the location of the heart and brain, at least.

Not long ago I was sitting around a campfire with five deer hunters in California. They were talking about heart shots. I listened awhile, then asked, "Just where is a deer's heart?" All five told me, and all five were wrong. They all had the heart too high. A deer's heart is in the lower third of the chest, a good handbreadth back of the foreleg. The hearts of most other animals are in the same area.

Grey couldn't shoot accurately. He let off his first shot when the charging beast was twenty-five yards away. That means that it was in the middle of the lion's next-to-the-last jump. Any man who can't put a bullet into a lion's chest at twenty-five yards when the animal's coming head-on shouldn't be hunting big game. Grey's first bullet went through the fleshy part of the lion's shoulder, expanded, and tore a nasty furrow along the animal's side. The second got the beast as it reared high in its final leap, entering the stomach from the chest cavity.

Now, if Grey had fired his first shot at ninety yards, and his second at sixty, and they'd done the same damage, he still would have died. For he'd made another mistake. He'd gone after lion with a double rifle and no second gun handy for emergency. Unless you're a whiz with a rifle, you need a minimum of five cartridges if you're going to shoot at a lion. Only a few old professionals consistently drop a lion with the first shot. The average sportsman takes four shots before he gets one in that lays the lion low. And if he's wise, he has a support gunner beside him just in case.

Personally, I like a ten-cartridge magazine. That's one of the reasons I prefer a military Lee-Enfield .303. Ten cartridges in the magazine and one in the chamber. Eleven shots. There have been times when I needed them all.

It's true that the double rifle is the fastest-shooting weapon made—for two shots. But by the time you grab your second rifle (if the bearer is still there), and let off two more shots, your four-shot total is slower than four shots with a bolt-action rifle.

How fast can a man shoot a bolt- or lever-action gun and still do accurate jobs? Well, I held some snap-and-rapid African championships. My best work was eleven bull's-eyes at 200 yards in 36 seconds. I used a Lee-Enfield .303 and worked the bolt without taking the butt from my shoulder. I used a wide-V backsight.

There's no place in dangerous game shooting for telescopic, small peep, narrow or buckhorn sights. I've known the best lion men in Africa. Almost without exception they use a wide-V backsight. Aiming with a wide V is as natural as pointing your finger. You merely see that the tip of the foresight lines up level with the backsight shoulders, so that it makes a perfect W out of the V. Tilting the barrel is bad business, and a man simply can't tilt the barrel unknowingly with a wide-V backsight.

It's possible that Grey waited until the last couple of jumps because he thought the lion was bluffing. Four times out of five, a lion's charge is a bluff. He's not really angry, but trying to frighten you away. There's a difference in their charges. When he means business, he comes full tilt. He uses all of his terrific speed. When he's trying only to scare you, he comes more leisurely—at about 100 yards in ten seconds.

Let's suppose you think a lion is bluffing, and that you do not want to kill him. Your best bet is to stand motionless until he's about twenty-five yards from you. If he's bluffing, he'll stop about there and switch his tail at you. If he doesn't stop, let him have it. If you think he's bluffing, and you don't feel like waiting to find out, and if there's a bush handy, step behind it. Once you're out of his sight, he'll probably be satisfied and forget you.

In any case, do not talk. There's something about the human voice that stirs rage in the hearts of some lions. You may be standing watching a peaceful family group lying under a tree. They see you, but except for an occasional lifting of their lips, ignore you. You speak and instantly one gets to his feet, stiffens his tail and rushes you. One of the problems of professional guides is how to keep clients from talking at wrong times.

Occasionally a lion which has stopped his rush and is staring at the hunter will be goaded into a genuine charge because someone starts talking. As for yelling at the brutes . . . well, I'll tell you about Orlando.

Orlando was an American Portuguese. I took him into Bechuanaland to the Okavango Swamp country for some big-game shooting.

Orlando was a short, dark, hard-talking hombre. His jaw stuck out like a crag. He liked to talk about fist fights he'd had, and always ended his yarns by saying, "So, I bopped him." On rhino and a buffalo, he did all right, but at his first sight of a lion he hurled his rifle at it. The beast was at least 150 yards away.

I said, "What's the matter? Snake bite you?"

He stared at me for a moment, turned to look at the lion, saw it was moving slowly in our direction, then grabbed me by the arms from behind and started

pushing. I jerked loose. He began yelling.

The lion, which I don't think had seen us up to that time, stopped, flipped his tail straight up three or four times, and came a-barreling. As I lifted my rifle, Orlando grabbed me again, and began shaking me. So I hit him.

The lion came within about fifty yards, then changed direction and galloped toward some brush. I let him go. Orlando got to his feet a bit groggy, but sane.

"Once when I was a kid," he said, "our cat scratched me and I got hysterical. Ever since, even a kitten gives me the willies."

"Well," I told him, "you can cure it. Just face up to the next lion. Better yet, let's go and get this one."

He shook his head. "Just get me back to Salisbury," he said.

So back to Salisbury we went.

I've seen several men who had an unreasonable fear of one beast or another. Some of them acted every bit as hysterical as Orlando did. Most of them cured themselves by standing up to their particular *bête noire* the next time they had a chance. That takes guts.

Never run from a charging lion. If two men are facing a lion and one man runs, the lion will take after him, passing up the man who stands quietly. Four of the twenty-three died while running from charging lions. One of the four, an Irishman named Wisdom, had just seen his lion run down a bull giraffe. He knew that a giraffe does a hundred yards in five seconds. He knew that the lion had caught up with the bull in six or seven jumps. Yet, when pressure was on, Wisdom ran. He didn't have a chance, of course. His partner, who'd stood his ground, got the lion, but not before the brute had broken Wisdom's neck with a sweep of its paw.

But let's get back to Grey. It's obvious that his troubles stemmed from the fact that he couldn't shoot straight. He wasn't in a panic. If he'd been in a panic, he wouldn't have waited until the lion was two jumps from him. He must have known he was no dead shot, otherwise, why the big-caliber rifle? No, he made the sad error of thinking that shock would kill a lion. I repeat: *It won't*. Neither will it kill a buffalo.

Grey's fatal encounter took place on open plain. The grass was short, so he could have shot at almost any distance. If the grass had been high, the lion would have stalked him to within fifteen or twenty yards before charging. That, of course, would have been an entirely different setup. Only a man with a suicidal urge, or who is just plain nuts, will hunt lion in shoulder-high grass. Two of the twenty-three made that mistake.

They were Englishmen of a type one often reads about but seldom sees. Their names were St. Leger and Meagher, pronounced "Sillinger" and "Mar." They were fine old fellows who wore wrapped cloth puttees, green riding breeches and pleated shooting jackets. Each smoked a big curved-stem pipe and drank great quaffs of whisky casually referred to as "nips."

The smallest rifles they had were .450 Powells. In addition, each had a .310

Rigby and a .600 express. Six gunbearers carried the rifles in green canvas cases.

St. Leger and Meagher wouldn't shoot standing beasts. "Not sporting, y' know. Must bag 'em on the run."

When I explained that I thought it more sporting to be sure of killing, rather than just wounding game, St. Leger said, "Do 'em in quickly. Elephant guns, y' know. Mustn't dispatch sitting beasts. Be like shooting sitting bares, what?"

I'd met the old codgers by appointment at their camp near Maun on the edge of the Okavango Swamp in Bechuanaland. What a camp! They'd set up four large double tents of green canvas. They had deck chairs. They had bookcases. They had two tables to each tent, lamps, cases of whisky and square-face gin. They'd set up a Whymper tent as a kitchen and had stocked it with every sort of canned goods. Under green tarpaulins were parked two Chevrolet station wagons and a Ford flatbed.

They greeted me with grave dignity, poured me a whisky and soda, made a few remarks about the weather and lapsed into uneasy silence. They puffed at their pipes awhile, then Meagher said, waving his pipe at the camp, "This sort of thing won't do, y' know."

St. Leger nodded. "Want to rough it," he said. "Not these bally conveniences. Not hunting, at all. Not Africa. Silly way to shoot."

I laughed. They looked so serious. I said, "I don't like this sort of thing either. How about getting an ox-wagon outfit together, and foot-slogging it about the country?"

A load seemed to drop from their shoulders. They beamed. Meagher said, "Sleep on the ground, what?"

"And live off the country," St. Leger added.

"Why not?" I said. "There's too much rocking-chair shooting being done these

days." Indicating the luxury camp, I added, "Somebody sold you a bill of goods."

"Excellent way to put it," Meagher said. "Fast-talking chap at Pretoria outfit us. Wouldn't stop talking, so we bought everything. Easiest way, y' know."

"Well," I said, "I'll go into Maun tomorrow and pick up a wagon outfit. It's too wet to go into the swamp. Rainy season's just ended. We'll go toward Dala, through grass, brush and sand country. How many boys have you?"

"Twenty-eight."

"We'll leave twenty-four of them here. I'll bring a white man back from Maun to watch camp."

"Leave our gunbearers here?"

"Yes, and leave all the rifles but your two .450s."

They took it on the chin like gentlemen.

Meagher got three water glasses from a cupboard. He poured them to the brims with Haig & Haig and handed them around. "Well," he said, downing half his glass, "cheer-o."

We loaded the ox wagon with plenty of blankets, corn meal, salt, sugar, milk, liquor, lanterns, pots and camping odds and ends. I chose a Bantu cook, a camp boy, an ox driver, and a voo-looper to lead the span. I had my own trackers, the Zulu, Ubusuku, and a Bantu named Jantje. We started northwest at dawn of the third day after my arrival. St. Leger and Meagher paced gravely beside the wagon. They thought they were fooling me, but I knew they were as excited as Boy Scouts on their first week-end camp.

I learned to love those old rascals. The wagon did about twenty miles a day, but the three of us and the trackers prowled the veld in all directions, sometimes doing thirty miles before reaching the outspan at night.

Surprisingly, they could shoot. Steady,

dogged, deliberate. They tossed a coin the first morning to see which of them would take the first shot at the first game. From then on, each took his turn, the other beside him, acting as support gun.

For five days we passed through a game paradise. Not the overwhelming herds of East Africa, but small, more exciting herds of gemsbok, hartebeest, springbok, zebra, reedbuck and duiker. Once or twice each day we spotted ostriches and on the fifth day, beside a clear-flowing spruit, we found lion dung. That did it. The old devils got lion fever, and from that moment nothing else would do. We made our base camp right there.

It was almost two weeks before we got a lion. In the meantime, I made St. Leger and Meagher responsible for getting meat for camp.

Long before the sun pushed red fingers around the eastern rim of the world, those two happy hunters had folded their blankets, piled them neatly on the wagon bed, and were cleaning overnight oil from their rifle barrels between sips of tea from great blue-enamel mugs.

I'd been teaching them a bit of spoofing and they became fascinated with the stories told by sign. It is not a difficult art to learn if one works at it. I've seen a greenhorn become the equal of the average native tracker in a few months.

While Ubusuku, Jantje and I stood around the fire, St. Leger and Meagher would circle the camp in the dim pre-dawn light, looking for dark, dewless animal trails through the wet grass. Down they'd get on their hands and knees looking for dung, the best identification of an animal.

I taught them to watch for nibbled and crushed grass, for dropped chewings; to test the moisture in hoofprints; to note whether or not the cloven hoofprints of antelope were spread wide, indicating running; and to keep their eyes open for a hundred other signs that make the veld a book easily read. They developed fast, chiefly because they concentrated with single-minded intensity.

One midmorning Jantje granted and pointed ahead to a group of three acacia-thorn trees. A yellow-maned lion had just got to his feet and was stretching sleepily, his mouth open in a wide yawn. The wind was toward us, so I said to St. Leger and Meagher, "There's a nice trophy. About a hundred and fifty yards. One of you take him."

They looked hurt. Meagher said, "Can't be done, old chap. He's standing, y' see."

I said, "Damn it, then walk toward him, and if he charges, shoot fast and sure." They moved ahead side by side, their .450s across their stomachs. The lion looked at them without interest and lay down again. Not so a female that had been hidden in the shade of a second tree. She came fast, leaping low, making no sound.

I held my sights on her—just in case. But St. Leger fired, kneeling. The big lioness turned a somersault, slapped her tail a few moments and lay quiet. The male got to his feet and moved behind a third tree. I lost sight of him for a couple of minutes, then saw him high-tailing it toward brush half a mile away.

HUNTING YEARBOOK



"He's a valuable dog in or out of hunting season."

The lioness was still. St. Leger and Meagher looked at me. I said, "Move closer, and put another slug in her. Can't ever tell."

A second shot wasn't needed. St. Leger's shot was one of the best I'd ever seen. Low in the chest, it got the lungs, heart, stomach and liver. The old boy stood beside the dead beast stroking his mustache with exaggerated calmness.

Meagher filled and lighted his pipe. He took a few puffs, then said, "Well bowled, Topper, old boy."

I'd never heard St. Leger's nickname before. It showed me that beneath his composure Meagher, too, was deeply moved. Disciplined old bluffers they were, shy as schoolboys.

Meagher got his lion about a week later, a male with a skippy mane. Meagher said ruefully that he'd have to buy it a wig before putting the head up in his den. He got the animal with a nice quartering shot through the shoulder-blade into the chest.

By this time the two old fellows who'd been overweight and in poor condition when I met them, were lean and hard. They fiddled around the veld for the next two weeks potting animals here and there. By the time the days got fiery hot and the grass got high and brown, they'd collected one springbok, one reedbuck, two buffalo, a small kudu, two zebra and two lions.

Then one morning a kudu bull left a clear deep print of a hoof in a soft spot where he'd watered. It measured almost six inches from heel to points, a good third larger than any kudu track I'd ever seen. Even I got excited: this could be a record bull. With a foot that size I figured he'd scale more than 500 pounds. His fresh trail was well marked through the grass. I let St. Leger and Meagher take the lead and they went ahead like bird dogs.

The bull was traveling upward. As we advanced, the grass rose from knee height to hip height, and finally to our shoulders. Lions could be had here, but I figured the old kudu wouldn't be moving so leisurely if big cats were around. Yet I was uneasy.

Then out of nowhere came an earth-jarring roar, and a male lion, blood dripping from his mouth, leaped at St. Leger.

It was the first time I'd heard a lion really roar in two years. St. Leger threw himself sideways, and the enraged lion missed him by inches. I shot from the hip. Meagher's rifle bellowed so close to my ear that I thought for a moment I'd been hit. The lion disappeared into the tall rough-edged grass.

St. Leger was unharmed but for once his reserve was shattered. He kept repeating, "By Jove! Oh, by Jove!" About thirty feet away we found the lion-mangled body of the kudu bull.

I went back to where we'd shot at the big cat. Both bullets had evidently hit.

I said, "While Jantje skims the kudu we'll take it easy, and give the lion's wounds time to stiffen. Then Ubuuku and I'll go after him."

"It's our job," St. Leger said.

I said, "No, stay here. I don't want the reputation of having my clients killed."

They kept protesting.

"Listen. A white-hunter friend of mine named Van der Wall let one of his sportsmen go into brush after a wounded lion. He'd told him how foolish it was, begged him to wait at least until the animal had time to weaken from bleeding.

"The guy wouldn't listen, said he'd come to Africa for thrills and that this was a worth-while one, and stalked into the brush. He walked right past the lion as it lay close to the ground in heavy underbrush. The lion hit him from behind, broke his neck, bit through his skull. Van der Wall dropped the lion on top of its victim, but that didn't do the dead man any good."

The sun was hot. Ticks were biting hard on my back. I said to Ubuuku, "Let's go over in the shade of that bush, and you can burn some ticks off me."

Ticks bury their heads deep. If you pull them off, the heads stay in the flesh and you have to dig them out with a knife. But if you put the flame of a match to their backsides they jerk their heads out in a hurry. Ubuuku got the ticks all right, and I was putting my shirt on when Jantje yelled, "Old men go get lion!"

I groaned in dismay. Ubuuku grabbed up his stabbing assegai and was gone like a flash. As I paused beside Jantje to pick up my .305, I saw Ubuuku dive head first into the grass. I checked the cartridges in the chamber and magazine and

trotted along the lion's trail. My worry was that he'd circle and come up behind the two men while they were following his sign.

The trail made a sweeping curve. Foamy blood spotted the ground grass here and there. Higher up, red blood streaks showed the beast had been hit high, probably near his rear. The blood wasn't smeared as it would have been had it been a front shot and the lion's body had rubbed against the stains in passing.

I called two or three times for St. Leger and Meagher to wait for me. They didn't answer. Then it happened all at once. I heard Ubuuku yell, heard the lion cough, heard one of the old men scream, saw a rifle go hurtling away like a helicopter propeller. I cut through the grass to the tar-moat, and my heart went sick.

St. Leger lay on the ground, a broken bloody mess. Meagher was under the lion, and the lion, with Ubuuku's assegai sticking out like a second tail, was coughing great bubbly gobs of blood. With three shots I made a mess of that lion's head.

St. Leger had a broken collarbone, a compound fracture of the ulna and several broken ribs. The blood on him proved to be the lion's blood. Meagher, when we got him from under the carcass, was claw-seen from shoulder to ankle. His clothes were ripped off. Those terrible foreleg swipes had struck like bolts of lightning. Had the lion been an inch closer when he struck, he'd have disemboweled Meagher.

Well, we got Meagher's bleeding stopped after a while, and he cursed as I poured iodine in his wounds. I took the first-aid kit over to St. Leger and bandaged him as well as possible. It took seven days to get the old gentlemen to Maun, where a private plane took them to Livingstone. Two weeks later I visited them in the hospital. As I walked into their room, I heard Meagher calling St. Leger a brittle-boned old female. St. Leger grinned at me, and said, "Twas a coin, will you, old chaps? Tails. I get that bunged-up lion's head, and Scar-bottom over there gets the kudu."

I tossed a coin and it came down tails.

—Alexander Lake