

THE KALI KILLERS

*Kali Means Fierce, But These Elephants
Were Downright Insane!*

By Peter Hathaway Capstick

I think you would have liked Charlie Denton-Smythe. Better known by his African name of Nyosi, he was the son of a — depending upon your viewpoint — famous, infamous or simply colorful ivory poacher. Born in Northern Rhodesia, he took Zambian citizenship when independence pitched up in the mid-'60s and, with more of Africa in his blood than an astonishing variety of malaria species, had gravitated naturally to game control. At one time he had worked with me in the great cropping scheme to reduce the overpopulated elephant herds of the Luangwa Reserve, and it was during this time he had earned that unique name. It means "Bee" and true to the usual talent of Africans to pick out a characteristic trait

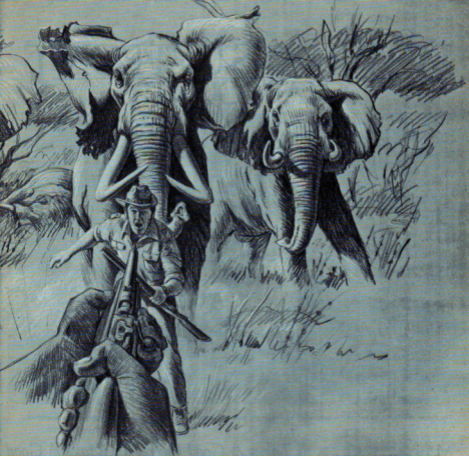
of a person, there was no mistake with Charlie. He was not tall, but if you ever saw him cranking solids out of his .416 Rigby in the face of a mass charge of jumbos, you would know there was no error about his sting. Although he now was handling the Nsefu area, not too far from my own control territory, we didn't see much of each other. But whenever each had a chance to drop by the other's camp, it was usually a night to remember. His last visit will certainly never be forgotten . . .

I was beat, just back at camp at full dark from inspecting the remains of a poacher-shot buffalo. It had been killed with a muzzle-loader and butchered, but although we followed for miles, the lead

was too great, and we lost the track of the poachers when the light failed. I had a pretty good idea who it might be, though, and decided to make a house call in the morning. Five hundred or so pounds of buffalo meat isn't all that easily concealed, especially when it's not cured with salt. I have a nose that, if sold by the pound, could put twins through college with the price of a sports car left over. Although it has absorbed sufficient contact with immovable objects to appear that it's not really sure where it's going, it still works well enough to locate rotting meat with some efficiency. Somebody was going to the *Kingi Georgi* slammer for a couple of months.

As I killed the engine of the "Rover and

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creaked out the doorless side, stiff as a stick of biltong. I spotted Charlie's hunting car pulled up on the far side of the compound. Hot damn! A little social relief in the offing! But he was nowhere in sight. And when I called to him, there was no answer. I started to get that gnawing little feeling in my guts that gives the sensation of having swallowed a live hamster. You don't know why, but there's, for flaming certain, something wrong. One of his men, a lanky chap who had once been attached to my staff, named Chindiri, came walking over to Silent and me, shuffling his feet in the half-light of the fire.

"Yimindabe?" I asked him. "*Ipi lo Bwana Nyosi?*"

Not looking up, he wordlessly turned

his head in a nod at the dark car. Finally, he muttered, "*Lapa, Basa. Na lo nloba Crackers. Yemababile file. Njovu.*"

My stomach hit my shoetops. Both Charlie and his gunbearer, Crackers, dead. Killed by elephant. That means very dead. Stunned, I walked over to Denton-Smythe's issue Land Rover and, with the light of my electric torch, caressed the two bloodstained sheets of canvas, each neatly trussed with homemade bark fiber ropes. I could vaguely imagine that they contained the crushed remains of two brave men, but you could hardly tell it by the odd, crumpled shapes concealed by the cloth. Chindiri and another of Charlie's men had gone looking for him when he and Crackers hadn't shown up at dark the day

before yesterday. They found the "Rover and backtracked until they came to the remains. Taking the canvas tarps from Charlie's car, they had scraped up all they could and managed to drive all the way to my camp although neither ever actually had operated an automobile before. It's not very good for your Great White Bwana image to sit down and bawl like a kid, so I'll just tell you I was very upset.

I squeaked out the cork of a bottle of Haig over at the little cane table near the fire and poured Chindiri and his mate a shot. They'd had a tough couple of days and had seen their duty through. Now there was the matter of the bodies being driven back to headquarters way down the

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valley and the immediate return to Nsefu to sort out what had happened. I had invisible top up the tank of my long wheel-base hunting car and ordered my men to transfer the corpses to my vehicle. Raising HQ on the radio, I explained briefly what had happened and told them to expect me.

Dawn was sneaking on pale, silent feet through the shadows when I arrived at the administration building. Strangely not over-tired from the long, kidney-thumping drive, I ate breakfast with the Chief Game Officer, unable to tell him any more than what I had been told. I suggested that I refuel and immediately head up to my camp and then on to Nsefu to investigate and take care of the men's personal effects. It would be a couple of weeks before a replacement crazy or dumb enough could be found to take over the post, so the C.G.O. asked me to shift as much of my operation as possible to include Nsefu, possibly seeing to the elephants that had killed Charlie and Crackers. The Chief told me that, during his last radio schedule with Denton-Smythe, Charlie had reported a very *kali* bunch of jumbos that he felt needed some attention as they had been chasing natives on sight and had that very morning given him several hairy minutes with a mass charge on his hunting car. I finished the last of my tea, wrote a letter to Charlie's mother, whom I had met, and took off back up the track to outfit myself and my men for a stay at Nsefu.

To pull into Charlie's camp gave me a terrible, hollow feeling of loneliness. Everything was in its place in his tent, the .416 worn but cleaned and gleaming in its case, his extra clothes neatly folded, even some money loosely jumbled in the top tray of his foot locker. Four of his staff were in camp, the cook and another young game guard who had not been along that deadly day, as well as Chindiri and his pal, who had walked back. Silent brought over Cracker's kit, neatly bundled, although his .404 service rifle was bent into junk while Charlie's Rigby somehow missed being trampled. It being only early afternoon, I was anxious to have a look at the site of the tragedy before weather and other natural factors obliterated the sign. With Chindiri guiding, we arrived at the spot in about an hour.

It was pathetically clear what had happened. The decomposing bodies of three dead elephants lay in a close huddle, their ivory still intact. Each bore a single, white-edged, pink-centered hole of a frontal brain shot, received while charging. Twenty yards from them, the heavy bush looked as if it had been used for a hand grenade range, thick stems of shrubs

smashed and the ground torn up over a 10-yard area. There were still thick clots of dried, black blood on the pale, flattened grass and an issue sneaker hung from a tall stand of thorn eight feet off the ground, missed by Chindiri. I hadn't had the heart or stomach to look at Charlie or Crackers, but they had obviously been mass charged and caught from very close range after killing two bulls and a cow. They had been gored, torn and completely flattened under the tremendous feet of the infuriated herd. In fact, Chindiri showed me the bloodstains where a major portion of Cracker's body has been found wedged in a tree crotch 30 feet away from where he had likely been killed. By the spoor, there had been something around 15 or maybe 16 elephants, including the three dead ones here.

"*Kali stelek, Bwana*," said Silent almost to himself. Right he was. Ferocious was hardly the term to cover it.

Kali is the term usually applied to any group of elephants that has, for one reason or another, taken up a permanently aggressive attitude toward man. Although actually KiSwahili for "fierce," it's found its way into most Bantu languages intact and well described this advanced state of extreme antisociability peculiar to some herds of elephants. Normal jumbos will cut and run at the first whiff of man, only putting on a threat display or real charge when caught in extenuating circumstances such as being hurt, with young or surprised at close range. Not a *kali* herd. Upon catching the first molecule of human scent, they mass attack. And they're for sure not bluffing. This fortunately rare but still well established group reaction may be the result of overharassment by poachers, leaving large numbers of the herd with painful but non-fatal wounds over the years. Or it simply could be a form of territorial defense instigated by a rapid reduction of habitat. Whatever the cause, there have been many infamous *kali* herds, all through the east, central and southern Africa, one of the most feared being that of the Addo area of South Africa which killed dozens of people including several hunters sent to shoot them out. Although even men of the steel breed of F. C. Selous claimed such a task was impossible without being killed, the great hunter, Major P. J. Pretorius did manage to exterminate the Addo herd.

Returning in late afternoon to Nsefu Camp, Silent and I sat down with Chindiri and the other game guard, James, for the African version of a pow-wow, called an *indaba*. Charlie's men confirmed the complaints that had been received in large numbers from the local chiefs of their people being chased and even two people killed by the same herd of elephants. Silent was especially interested to know if either Chindiri or James actually had seen

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the herd and could identify one or more of the members. There were a hell of a lot of elephants in the vast region of Nsefu and the spoor from the place where the men had been killed was now far too cold to follow. We couldn't very well start bashing jumbos indiscriminately, so it was important to be able to identify the herd. As it turned out, Chindiri had been in the Rover with Charlie the day they were charged, almost having bumped into the herd on a blind corner of a track where it crossed a small river. They had escaped by almost the thickness of the tattered paint on the tailgate, but Chindiri clearly remembered that there had been a very big cow with long, slender tusks that crossed at the tips. This is a fairly common tusk configuration in East Africa, but for some reason, it's not often seen in Zambia. By spotting her with a group of somewhere around a dozen others, we could be 99 percent sure it was the bad bunch.

It had been impossible to tell the circumstances of how Charlie and clever, old, one-eyed Crackers had been overwhelmed, but most likely they had been stalking the herd in an attempt to set them up and been caught by a wind change that brought an instant, unstoppable mass charge. Well, if you're going to roll dice, you have to expect some snake-eyes.

As dawn broke the next morning, I sent everybody scouting to the east, fanning out over the direction where the herd had last been seen, although four days ago by now. What the hell, you had to start somewhere. Instructed to look for the cross-toothed female, whoever spotted the herd was to get at least a mile away from them before lighting a signal fire which I should be able to see from the top of a nearby granite kopje that rose 60 stony feet into the sky.

The sun hung overhead like a billion-watt heat lamp, the miles and miles of bloody Africa shimmering through the lenses of my 7x30 binoculars filtered by a searing haze as distorting as a fun-house mirror. My bum was numb from sitting atop the highest boulder. I stretched, taking a tiny sip of the water although I could have drained the whole flax sack. Below, Silent hunkered in the shade of a tree next to my Rover, staring hopefully up at me, his spear jammed into the earth by its iron-shod butt. And then there it was, a slender, wispy feather that grew steadily into a gray plume of smoke about 10 miles to the east. I shot a quick azimuth with my pocket compass and scampered, half falling down the hill. From the direction, it would be invisible who had made contact, and I knew he would have the savvy to move back in the direction of camp before kindling the signal fire so we would not spook the herd as we approached.

We drove hard, the cruel thorn bush

rasping against the almost paintless fenders of the car. The .470 Evans Nitro Express double and the .375 H&H magazine rifle were both snug in their holders, tied by loops of sliced inner tubes. About a mile from our destination, I caught sight of the smoke and made a slight correction in our zig-zagging around bush and trees. Invisible, now joined by Chindiri, was waiting expectantly as we pulled up.

"Yenazonke kona lapa, Bwana," he said, pointing to the herd's location. "Twelof," he continued in Fanagalo, "na lo mfaci ga lo mazingo welaile." Spot on. An even dozen, including the big cow with the crossed tusks. For sure the right herd.

With Invisible in the lead, we began trotting toward the place. I was anxious to catch up with them while they would still be dozing away the midday heat, rather than on the move, so I could set them up properly. Taking on a dozen proven killer elephants even with a back-up in Chindiri does not call for just barging in and blazing away. From my years as a cropping officer for the old National Cold Storage Board down at Mfuwe, I was used to taking on groups of 20 or so jumbo with men like Charlie and Bob Langevelt. They were, however, not *kali* elephants. When the big cow that was the herd leader was goaded into a charge and brained, mopping up the rest of the disorganized survivors shouldn't be all that tricky with my experience, although still a long way from woodcock shooting. I was carrying the .470 and Silent the .375 with a fistful of cartridges for the bigger double. I knew I could drop the first four as fast as I could load and then probably another two before anybody big, gray and wrinkled tried to bite me. The last six? Well, we'll see how the battlefield looks.

They were pretty much where Invisible had left them, although from a hundred yards through the thick *miombo* scrub, only five were in sight. I studied the patchwork of shadows and sun-dappled gloom with the little glasses until I was certain that the five were the nearest edge of the small herd. To be halfway through a stalk and turn around to find a six-or-seven-ton surprise right behind you is a most unsettling sensation, as I can relate in far greater detail than I like to recall. It's almost a religious experience, as the odds are excellent you're about to meet your maker.

The light wind was ideal, straight into our faces as Silent, Chindiri and I began to move forward. I was a touch nervous that I hadn't yet seen the female with the crossed teeth and surely didn't want to beat up on the wrong herd. At 50 yards, I was relieved to find a termite hill about six feet high and as solid as a concrete tank trap. If you've done much elephant hunting, you quickly learn to think much

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more about the way out than the way in. Shooing off Invisible, who wasn't armed but for his spear, I whispered to Chindiri to stay five paces to my right rear and not to fire unless he was positive I was about to get elephantized. No need for a word to Silent; he would be in precise position behind me as long years together had developed. A convention of mastodons could be pouring down on us, and I always knew that if I put out a hand for that insurance rifle, it would instantly be there and not on its way up the nearest tree.

Passing the termite heap, I led us to within 15 yards of the nearest jumbo, which was dreamily rocking his massive weight side to side. Stock-still, we waited, trying to catch a glimpse of the identifying female. Aha! There she was, in a deep pocket of shade, the thin tusks overlapping at the tips. Satisfied, I lined up the nearest bull and mentally marked a cow just past him as the recipient of the second barrel. My nostrils full of elephant, I squeezed off the first round and swung on the cow even as the bull was toppling from a side brain shot that caught him precisely between the eye and ear hole. I had to pause a split second as the female swung toward me, ruining the angle I had chosen, but stuck her with a three-quarter brain shot that flattened her as if she'd been tagged by the Paris Railway Gun.

Some old-time ivory hunters didn't believe in ejectors. I do, and in spades. The empty cases streaked smokily over my shoulder as I dunked in a fresh pair of brass panatellas with my left hand. None too soon, either. I'd shot up plenty of elephant herds before, as I told you, but I never saw anything like *this*! Within a single second, the bush became an absolute animal wall of screaming, trumpeting insanity. Every bloody one of them was charging at top speed straight at us without the tiniest hesitation. I knocked down the two nearest and managed to get another pair of .470 rounds out of my tunic pocket and into the hot chambers.

"*Baika!*" I shouted to Silent and Chindiri. "Run like hell!"

At five yards, I smashed a good-sized bull who piled up right in front of another, helping to form a rough barrier with the other corpses. As he veered to come around the pile-up, I caught him with a deadly angle shot, and he stopped as if he'd run headlong into the side of a mountain. With the Evans empty and no real shortage of very irritated elephants still on the way, I turned and took off like the proverbial primate for the shelter of the termite hill, loading as I ran. I was 10 yards short when I saw Chindiri throw up his .404 Jefferey's and fire, which would have scared me right out of my socks if I'd been wearing any as he looked to be aiming right at my head! However, there

was a solid 'whock' of his slug right behind me and a soft, landslide sound as a huge old cow went down. She had come in from the flank and, I later learned, almost had her trunk on me when Chindiri put her down. A second later, I was at the termite hill and behind it. I stunned a bull with one barrel of the .470 and had to use the second to cool him, swapping Silent for the .375 as he fell.

Four to go. Or, perhaps better said, four still coming. Leading the survivors was the cow with the crossed tusks, who was carrying her head quite high, swinging it back and forth as she screamed. The old rule from the cropping days was branded on my brain: pretend there's a line that runs through the elephant's head and sticks out each ear hole. Just visualize where the center of the line is in the middle of the skull and shoot for that spot. Never mind what the angle, you'll hit the brain. I gave her a 300-grain solid low at the base of the trunk. Her head rocked with the impact and she slid down onto her knees and balanced there, the tremendous muscles supporting the skull leaving her appearing oddly alive.

As she collapsed, a tangible wave of uncertainty seemed to wash over the last three, all younger cows. I prayed we would be able to spare them and told Chindiri to fire over their heads as I covered them. At his shot, we all shouted biological impossibilities at the tops of our lungs and they hesitated again. At last, they swapped ends and trundled off, still trumpeting shrilly.

I passed out cigarettes and kept an eye on Chindiri as he shot the nine jumbos again. Silent and Invisible rigged up the SSB radio and stretched a long piece of wire between two tree limbs so I could raise the cropping recovery unit with their tractors and flatbeds to pick up the carcasses so there would be no waste. The slaughterhouse would use every last scrap of the *kali* herd; meat, skin, ivory, even the viscera for fertilizer and the tail hairs for good-luck bracelets. Bad enough to have had to kill nine elephants; how much worse it would have been to waste them. At least their by-products would keep other elephants alive by producing the funds to maintain habitat, the loss of which is the biggest problem faced today by the African elephant.

There was no doubt that these were the same animals that had killed Charlie Denton-Smythe and Crackers. On inspecting them, I found a fresh bullet crease in the head skin of the second animal I had shot. Justice? Who the hell knows? Charlie and Crackers were dead and nine — no, make that 12 — of the herd were also dead. As I sat smoking, I couldn't help thinking about Charlie, though. Lord, but what a way to go, and only 28 years old. But, come to think of it, Africa never has offered many attractive alternatives. ■