



Rikhoff, right, and white hunters Dave Ommanney and John Kingsley-Heath check author's lion. The big cat took a total of six shots before it finally died.



Hunters move through the brush on the heels of the wounded lion. The animal was hit hard by author's first shot and it left a blood trail for tracking.



■ On the fourth night of our safari we sat with our two leopards propped up in front of the fire and celebrated. We shared a camaraderie that can only come when you have been very lucky and everything has gone for the best. My professional hunter, John Kingsley-Heath, and I had strung up three fresh baits the day before. My partner, Scott Healy, and his hunter, Dave Ommanney, had hung another two. This evening Scotty and I both had knocked over leopards, which must be some sort of record for speed and efficiency in leopard hunting.

We had the best of everything and that happens rarely in anyone's life. We knew it and we were making the most of it. Tomorrow would be another day—perhaps the same as today or, by some fantastic chance, better, but more likely a little drab in comparison to the achievements of this fine day.

Then, as we sat with our drinks late into the night, we heard a distant cough. Silence fell upon the group as if by some signal. A grunting rumble rolled in from the night. It was a sound I had heard only once before, in Mozambique. Scotty, even though he had never heard the sound before, knew exactly what it was.

"Yes, that's a lion—a big, hungry, male lion," Scotty said. "It's over there on that hill where the Masai boy said it would be." It was that simple. We got up from the fire, the excitement of our leopards swept away by the insistence of that impatient, grunting demand.

We had a lion in our district and it was only a mile away. Everything had changed. We now had a lion in our own backyard, and it was up to us to figure how to take the animal.

In our beds that night we listened to the lion over on its hill. The animal was either very hungry, very passionate or very disgruntled because it kept up its steady grunting-coughing routine for as long as I could keep my eyes open. I went to sleep with its roar in my ears and its picture in my mind. The picture was sharply defined. The lion was big, with a heavy black mane. It was stone dead and I, gun in hand, stood over it in a Teddy Roosevelt stance.

Scott Healy, a long-time hunting buddy, and I had made a spur-of-the-moment decision in May, 1963, to come over to Kenya for a safari in June. Normally, such short-notice safaris are not recommended. But Kenya was making its transition from colony to home rule and the tourist-sportsmen were staying away in droves. Our two white hunters were Ker & Downey's top men. After a fast Alitalia flight via Rome and Athens, we landed at Nairobi. Dave Ommanney met us, and we were off on safari in the Narok District in Block 59 of Kenya's Masailand a short time later.

At breakfast the next morning our leopards were almost forgotten. The talk was of lions. John Kingsley-Heath spoke in the quiet, final tone that I had grown to respect. "Listen, chaps," he said, "we should not pass up that poached giraffe that Scotty and Dave spotted over on the private farm outside the preserve." A lion had been working on one of the hindquarters. Scotty and Dave agreed that they would check the carcass.

"Jim and I will head for the lion's hill," John said, nodding toward me. "It probably killed last night on the plain and is sleeping its gluttony off not very far from the remains."

Breakfast was a hurried [Continued on page 101]

LIONS ARE DEADLIEST JUST BEFORE THEY DIE

In Kenya everything I had heard about lion hunting proved true, especially the danger of messing up that first shot. Prying my wounded lion out of the brush took a few years off my life

BY J. C. RIKHOFF

PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHOR

Lions Are Deadliest Just Before They Die

[Continued from page 25]

affair. We had other things on our minds. With Scott and Dave off in one direction, John and I loaded up the other Land Rover and made a straight line for the round hill where the lion had spent its noisy night. It was a short trip and in a very few minutes we were loading our rifles for a sneak up a path we had noted the day before.

I had brought only one rifle to Africa with me—my favorite Winchester Model 70 in .264 Winchester Magnum. But Kenya's law requires that a .375 or larger must be used on lion, so John had loaned me a well-stocked and slightly worn Model 70 in .375 H&H Magnum.

As I loaded the big rifle with 300-grain Silvertip ammunition I hoped that I would shoot well—or miss cleanly. A wounded lion is no nicked whitetail deer. Many consider a wounded lion to be the most dangerous animal on earth and the record would seem to bear this out. More hunters have been killed by wounded lions than by any other species in Africa. The year before a wounded lion had killed an American hunter in Angola shortly after he had made the mistake of shooting the big cat with a small .300 Magnum bullet.

John loaded his .470 double-gun, handed it to Kiebe, his senior gun bearer, and with an inquisitive glance at me, started walking up the hill. He had the

lion figured for an area immediately on the crest. We would follow our winding path from the base of the hill, proceed around it toward the opposite side and would hope to come up on the animal before it either winded or heard us. From that moment on, its actions would decide what form the script would take. I slung the .375 over my shoulder and followed John. I kept thinking, *This is really it—I am finally going after a lion and anything can happen.*

I had spent a lot of time speculating on exactly what could happen. First, the lion could be gone and that would take care of the matter right away. Or, the animal could be there and I could kill it with one shot—and that would be fine for everybody, with the obvious exception of dead simba. Next, I could miss completely and the lion could take off in the other direction; we could consider this a draw—we don't get the lion, but then the lion doesn't get any of us. Lastly, I could wound the lion. I didn't like to think about this at all, but it kept intruding into my thoughts. It was not a happy picture.

But none of these possibilities turned out. We crept along the trail for about 15 or 20 minutes. We were steadily climbing and the going was rough in spots, so that I began to find myself a little winded. Suddenly, as we neared the top and were coming around a corner, John stopped short and called me urgently. But all I had seen was a flash of yellow hurling with unbelievable speed into the brush. I didn't even get the rifle to my shoulder.

On the way back to camp John outlined a plan. While he thought we had ruined our chances with our lion that

morning, he felt that we should at least make a drive through the heavy cover the lion had disappeared into on the slope of the hill. There was a chance the lion had remained hidden there rather than cross the open plain for another patch of cover somewhere in the surrounding country. We would equip the camp personnel with pots and tin cans and send them in skirmish line across the cover. Scotty and I would be on stands.

Scott and Dave were having lunch when we drove up. They had had bad luck too. They had heard the lion coming to the dead giraffe. But the animal must have winded them before coming into the open. In any event, it had suspected all was not quite right and had never shown itself. They were still full of hope for the evening or following morning. In the meantime, they were enthusiastic about John's plans for the afternoon lion drive.

In a short time our mixed band of hunters was back at the hill. After a bit of planning and assignment of responsibilities, Scotty and I were taken to our stands by Dave. I was left by a tree about midway up the hill with instructions to climb it, get comfortable on a good-sized limb, keep quiet and wait. It was obvious that I was to be careful to shoot a lion rather than one of the Africans.

Dave and Scotty took off and I felt very much alone. I got up the tree in very short order, but my position dismayed me somewhat. While there was quite a bit of space between the ground and my limb in front, there was very little between my sagging posterior and the sharply rising ground behind me.

John had taken the drivers to the opposite side of the brush. After another 10 minutes or so I suddenly heard the first tentative banging and rattling of pots and cans, and some of the most unenthusiastic shouting I've ever heard. The Africans, understandably, were not very keen about their job. The noise continued and then I made out the first figure carefully wending its way forward through the brush on the opposite flank of our hill. Soon a few more men drifted into view. Nothing seemed to be stirred by their noise-making. If there were any lions in the vicinity, they were laying mighty low.

Then I heard a slight noise. Perhaps it was the rattle of a small rock as it rolled downhill. I saw or heard nothing for the next few moments but I knew that something was making its stealthy, quiet way toward my tree ahead of the beaters on the other side. I gripped my gun and my limb tightly, checked my safety, placed it on half-safe, tentatively raised the Model 70 to my shoulder.

Another noise. And then I noted a movement in the brush a scant 20 yards directly in front of my perch. I brought the gun up as the silent figure glided out of the brush and walked directly under my tree—and I almost fell off the limb as the hyena lost itself in the brush behind me. It was the only animal the beaters put out that day.

We were now a discouraged crew. On the way back to camp John gently pointed out that our lion-hunting days were probably over. We had had our chance, which is all any man can ask for, and now we would go back to hunting plains game in a nice leisurely fashion. Meanwhile, Scotty and Dave would go back to their giraffe carcass to wait out their lion. They had a good chance since that particular beast had not been rustled up as much as mine.

Dave and Scotty got up in the middle of the night and were off for their lion site long before dawn. John and I luxuriated in our cots until the decadent hour of 6 a.m., had a long lazy breakfast and decided to make an easy hunt on the plains in the early morning air about 7 a.m. In short order we were casually

rolling along in the Land Rover with Kiebe and Mohammed as companions. There was an early morning haze drifting up from the plain.

Herds of zebra, Grant's and Thomson's gazelle, eland and kongoni watched us in curiosity as our intruding vehicle meandered along through their territory.

There was a grove of acacia and fever trees shielding a small water hole to the right of our intended path some 300 or 400 yards away. We were plotting a course between yesterday's lion hill and that water hole when John suddenly pulled to a halt. He remained silent as he continued to stare ahead. I looked forward and suddenly something—I know not what to this day—made me uneasy. I was aware that something was somehow wrong, but I could not put my finger on it. At the same time Kiebe murmured something in Swahili to John, who grunted what seemed to be an affirmative.

"Listen to those jackals over at the water hole," I remarked, "sounds like they're really feasting."

"Yes, yes, look a minute, Jim," John's quiet tones had an undercurrent of expectant excitement, "see those kongoni! They should be staring at the water hole or us, but they're not . . . they're looking up at the hill. Let's see . . . Hell's Bells, there are two lions!" He shoved the Land Rover into low, spun the steering wheel and we took off in a wide circle. We were heading back behind the hill.

In no time flat John had the Rover revved up into second and then third. We were soon bouncing along the plain at a good 35 miles an hour, which is a lot faster than anyone should. I crawled back into the rear seat and got our big-bore rifles ready. Then—as we jostled and bounced along our way—I stuck my head and shoulders through the porthole in the top of the cab so I could keep the lions in sight. John wanted to know if they moved or showed any alarm at our movement.

Once we rounded the hill the lions were out of sight. Without a word, everyone but Mohammed jumped from the vehicle. With John in the lead, we took off at a fast pace for the top of the hill. I stayed right on John's heels. I intended

to be in the right place at the right time this time.

"Look, you'll have about half a minute at best for your shot when we pop over that hill. The lion will be in that thick brush in a flash when it gets wind of us," John whispered as he lengthened his stride.

I nodded, a thousand thoughts and questions going through my head. And then we were at the top of the hill and John crouched down as he eased his body over the crest. I was a second behind him, but only a second. I looked down and there they were. I threw my gun to my shoulder as the lioness popped her head up and the male jumped to its feet.

"Shoot—shoot quick! They've seen us!" There was a flash of yellow that sped through my telescopic sight. I swung the Model 70 like a shotgun and pulled the trigger as my sight swept through the lion's running shoulder. The crack of the rifle blurred my vision in the sight and I raised my head for a second just in time to see the lion spin its back quarters a bit. I hurriedly worked another cartridge into the chamber and tossed another bullet behind the lion as it disappeared into the brush, the lioness hard on its heels. The whole thing was over in less than 10 seconds.

"Oh, hell . . . you've missed. Well, that ties it, you'll never get another chance like that!" Kingsley-Heath said in quiet despair. "Two great chances . . . I guess lions just aren't your meat."

"No, no!" Kiebe was gesturing violently and with firm conviction. He had raised his left arm and repeatedly pointed with his right forefinger to the rib area directly below the armpit.

"Shot? Are you sure?" John turned to me, "Jim, Kiebe says that you hit. Did you? I didn't hear the bullet hit or see anything."

"I think I hit him the first time . . . his hind end seemed to spin around. It happened so fast I can't be sure, but I think so." Kiebe had run to where the lions had been sitting and was shouting and wildly gesturing. We ran forward. There was blood and bits of flesh on the ground.

"Oh, my lord, you've shot him in the ass," John sighed as if someone had just

passed a hanging sentence with little hope of reprieve. He stood there shaking his head, silent for a moment or two, listening carefully for another minute and then turning to speak in a long, low conversation in Swahili with Kiebe who had lost quite a bit of his previous enthusiasm. After a moment, he turned to me, gave me a careful glance, seemed to make up his mind about something, and motioned me to check my rifle and closely follow him. Kiebe brought up the rear.

We walked very slowly and quietly forward for a few paces and then stopped. John and Kiebe said nothing and I—in the blackest despair—kept my mouth shut. Both of my companions seemed to be straining for some sixth sense that would keen their natural five to some sort of hint of what was ahead. Silence. No bird sang. No animal chattered. The wind was still. We went forward a few more paces. We were entering the first scattered bits of brush and bush that thickened a few yards ahead and concealed anything that might be lurking in the shadows.

We stopped, listened and then continued a bit farther. Again and again we stopped. Still nothing. Only an occasional bit of flesh on a bush or a crimson drop on the grass forced the reality of the situation onto us. We could not forget or pretend that it had never happened. And then John motioned us back.

We slowly walked backward, our faces and guns pointed forward into the hidden danger ahead. In a few more minutes we were back in the open and down the slope. Mohammed was waiting for us by the tree that had sheltered the lions for their sunbath another world before. He had brought the Land Rover up, expecting to load a lion. Instead he had found a mess—the classical case of the wounded lion in heavy brush with possible death for everyone.

When we got back to the vehicle, John sighed heavily, propped his gun against the fender and lit a cigarette. I stood silent and ashamed. Ashamed that I had put these decent, hardworking, honor-

able people in such a rotten mess. I knew that John had been badly mauled by a client's wounded lion in 1961 and had very nearly died. Kiebe saved his life but had been chewed up a bit as well. Both of them had a finely engraved memory of wounded lions.

"Look John, I feel awful about this. I don't want you people doing anything that will endanger anybody."

"But it's rather out of our hands now, old chap, isn't it? We've got ourselves a wounded lion and that's that. The Masai *menyatta* is just up the plain and herdsmen are wandering by here every day. He'll get one if we don't put him down permanently."

Kiebe suddenly barked a short Swahili sentence and pointed downhill and across the plain below us. We followed his finger to the slowly moving Land Rover patiently making its way on a parallel path some miles distant. A lazy ribbon of dust rose behind the car for some distance. We ran forward shouting and waving our shirts. When it seemed that they would continue on without seeing us, the Rover suddenly veered in our direction and picked up speed. It was Scotty and Dave, of course, and in five minutes they pulled up beside us.

"What goes, chaps, got a lion or something?" Dave said with a grin.

"Yes, a wounded lion—over there in that brush," John said.

"Goodbye," Dave said. But they got out of the car. Dave's grin was gone. He had been bitten by a wounded leopard a couple of years before. As I hurriedly briefed Scotty on one side, Dave and John held a conference with their senior gun bearers. In a few moments they came over and told us to load up our rifles and take a stand on the top of the Land Rovers. We would be able to command the area below a small bluff they intended to climb for a view of the brush they thought hid the lion. They took a long swing around through the open, went over the rim of the ridge and approached the knoll from behind. We watched from below as they hunkered down to scan the brush below them.

They sat and sat and sat. Then they conferred and sat some more. And so it

went for a good 20 minutes. Finally a decision was reached. The whole party got up and proceeded down on the opposite side—through the brush—from which they had climbed originally. In another 10 minutes they were back.

"We got a surprise," John said. "We thought he was down in that brush under that little knob. But when we took a long swing around and down through the brush on our way back, we cut his blood trail leading out over to that heavy brush farther along the side of the hill. We've got to follow him up right away before he runs across a native."

The two pros got out their double rifles—both .470's. Scott limbered up his .458 Model 70. Kiebe, Katheka and I all had .375 H&H Model 70 rifles. John outlined the ground rules. The name of the game was kill the lion as fast and as completely as possible. If you saw the lion, start shooting . . . you might not get many more seconds to make up your mind. Dave led the way and John backed him up. Scotty covered the high ground. I covered the low ground below our path. Kiebe and Katheka covered our rear.

We would stalk a few yards and stop to listen. When we did, everyone would face outward to form the classic "British square." Safeties off. In no time at all we had picked up a patch of blood where the lion had lain down after its first escape. Spots here and there showed its retreat on a steady line to the left around the hill.

We went forward a few yards and stopped as before. Every sense was tense, expecting the worst. Curiously, I felt a strange excitement. We continued a few more yards and stopped, then a few more punctuated by another hesitation. And then suddenly John, who was immediately in front of me and slightly above to the left, raised his rifle and fired. All heads and rifles turned toward the spot where he had aimed. Nothing moved.

"I missed him," John said. "I just saw the top of his mane and took an estimate where his head was and shot. Couldn't take a chance. I saw him take off." He moved forward and held something up. His .470 bullet had clipped a bit of mane.

A shout from Kiebe drew our attention behind us. We turned to see Kiebe bending down over a dark patch 20 feet directly behind where Scott and I had stood.

When we ran down, we found a patch of darkening, already clotting blood.

"John, you shot at another lion!" Dave gasped and turned his rifle toward a bloody path leading away from the gore. "He must of laid doggo here through the whole thing . . . boy, we're lucky he didn't take somebody when we all turned at John's shot. Two lions . . . just what we needed!"

"Let's get to it," John said. "He can't be far ahead and from the look of that blood he's hurt worse than we thought." Without another word, the white hunters started down the path of broken grass and occasional blood spore.

We had just got our party sorted out and in their customary position on the trail—with each guarding an approach to the group—when there was a low growl. Dave came skittering back toward me and a flash of yellow spurted out of the brush as two quick shots split the air. The lion turned and was gone again.

"Missed him, I think, but maybe not," Dave said. "Can't tell, but he won't be turned again. Come on, Jim, he's your

lion. Scotty, keep your safety off too." He checked his partner with a glance and they were off. We hadn't gone 20 yards when that same growl filled my ears, heart, bowels and every inch of my frame. I forced my feet forward just as I saw Dave raise his rifle again. The lion was coming out of the grass. Dave shot. The lion jumped, the bullet tearing into its back.

"Get him, Jim!" I shot. The bullet bit into the upper shoulder, breaking the animal down. The lion savagely bit at the wound as I shot another time. The bullet hit the paw and entered the head. The animal raised its head, but the mane obscured a good shot. I shot again, tearing into its spine. The lion was turning and twisting, trying to get back at us. I shot again and the lion collapsed. I had finally found the brain. The lion quivered, shuddered in a last convulsion and relaxed into death. We watched the still form for a few tentative moments. Kiebe tossed a rock, then another. Then he poked a long stick at the lion's eyelid.

"He's dead," John said. "He ought to be—with all those holes in him."

"You said shoot till he didn't move and I shot," I said, gingerly nudging the lion with my boot.

"I'm not complaining, I'm not com-

plaining!" John's face opened in a wide, happy grin. "Well, I must say I'm glad this ended this way." Kiebe was examining the lion's chest and muttering to himself.

"What's that?" John asked. "Jim hit him in the ribs with the first shot after all?" Kiebe was acting very smug. His estimation of my original shot was right. My shot had entered directly below and behind the shoulder. But due to my elevated position on the top of the hill, the bullet had angled down to come out of the bottom of the lion's body instead of coarsing through the lungs to the other side and out.

"I take back all those things I've said and the many more I've thought," John said. "That was either the best or the luckiest damn shot you've ever made in your life!"

"Lucky. I didn't even know I'd hit him for sure, but I'm glad I didn't make a botch of it with a shot in his rear."

"That would have been a dead lion in a couple more hours," Dave added.

The mention of time brought me back to reality. We had not been thinking about hours and minutes. I looked at my watch. It was 11 o'clock. I had shot the lion about 7:30. This had been a hair-raising way to spend a sunny morning in Africa.—J. C. Rikhoff