The white beam revealed the great beast beside the sheep's carcass

Three Nights in a Boma

By HUGH PRIOR

Illustrated by LYNN BOGUE HUNT

AS we waited for the dusk that follows so closely on sundown to enter the boma which our boys had just completed, I recalled what a professional big-game hunter had once said to me: "No boma hunting for me. Too much suspense in it. And it's taking the lion's behavior too much for granted. After all, sportsmanship aside, the only way to meet a lion is right out in the open. And take it from me, that is the safest way."

That night I was to have my first taste of lion hunting from a boma. With the hunter's words in mind, I was conscious of a certain uneasiness at the prospect. This uneasiness did not seem to be shared by Graham, whose guest I was.

My settler friend had a big place on the border of the Uasin Gishu, in northwestern Kenya, East Africa. Stock raising was his chief activity, and the stock was subject to periodic attacks by lions. Just before my arrival he had wiped out a raiding band, all but one lone marauder, a beast so cunning that Graham could not lay a sight on him in daylight. Hence the boma, a last resort that he occasionally found necessary.

A boma is merely a hiding place, an ambush. It is in no sense of the word a protection against a lion. Cover is all it provides.

Our boma was the regular type: just an oblong enclosure of branches, woven around a series of stakes. It was some eight by six feet, a foot or so thick and about six feet high. Two small holes were left, facing a gentle rise in the ground—loop-holes for our rifles. We were going in there for sky-line shooting only. There are other, and perhaps less sporting, forms of boma hunting.

On top of the rise, about twelve feet from the loop-holes, was placed the carcass of a bullock, shot on the spot and fastened by stout ropes to the trunk of a near-by sapling. Since the lion had been feeding for so long on domestic stock, Graham figured that the bullock's carcass, rather than that of a zebra or kongoni, would be sure to draw him. When the lion approached the bait to feed, he would be silhouetted against the clear equatorial sky-line like a figure in an etching. A target in which two rifles, firing simultaneously, could hardly fail to plant at least one fatal bullet.

In the falling dusk we crawled through the entrance left for us. The boys plugged it behind us and, with orders to return at dawn and free us, left us to our vigil. The guttural conversation that floated back to us, vividly picturing what they would find in the morning if simba should decide to attack us, had a grimly amusing disregard for our feelings.

Soon the swift, fog-like darkness that shrouds equatorial Africa between sunset and moonrise enveloped our filmy shelter. Conversation, except for an occasional whispered remark, was taboo. The human voice is a sound so entirely alien to the wild that a single audible sentence might make a whole night's vigil profitless.

The fall of darkness did not bring silence. There is no real silence in the African night. Then the preying jungle is awake and on the hunt. Sometimes you hear the harsh, grating snarl of a leopard and then the distant, rumbling "wo-o-f, wo-o-f" of a prowling lion, and you wonder why these animals herald their approach. And while you are wondering the night may be pierced by the death scream of some stricken beast, fulfilling the relentless law of the jungle.

WITH the falling of night complete blackness, which the diffused light of the big, bright equatorial stars did nothing to lessen, filled the space within our enclosure. That would make for more accurate sighting against the cloudless sky.

Laying our barrels in line with the bait, we settled down to wait. Slow hours seemed to pass. Our enforced silence, limitation of movement and the strain of listening brought a steadily growing suspense. Time after time I relaxed rigid muscles, lifted a cheek sore from unconscious pressure against my rifle stock. And still the sky-line remained unbroken.

As I was wondering whether our expected guest was dining elsewhere, at Graham's expense, a slight nudge instantly recalled my attention to the business in hand. The faint, closer night noises had not noticeably varied. I had heard no soft pad of foot, no faint swish of the

Hunters have belittled shooting dangerous game from a boma as lacking in thrill and being unsportsmanlike. Read this author's experiences and change your mind

short grass, to indicate that any beast was creeping near.

At Graham's touch, however, I heard another sound, one that sent a quick, prickly shiver tingling along my spine. It was a slow, long-drawn sniff, the soft hiss of air being drawn into mighty lungs. The lion was there! His questing muzzle was touching the other side of our thin wall of bush, scarcely more than twelve inches from my ear.

If anyone thinks that a boma takes the thrill out of lion hunting, let him listen to that sound in those circumstances. I am sure that, nine times out of ten, he would swap the feeling of muffled helplessness for the face-to-face meeting with the king of beasts out on the broad, bright veldt.

The 600-pound beast had stolen up to our hiding place as noiselessly as a ghost. He knew perfectly well we were there. He had known it when he was perhaps a hundred yards away—when he crouched back defensively at the first whiff that warned him of the presence of his enemy.

The sniffing ceased, and was resumed a moment later a few feet away. A minute or more passed, and it was repeated in front of us, where the muzzles of our rifles protruded through the holes in the hedge. Then it died away, and for any further sign he gave of his presence the lion might have been miles away.

I knew that men hiding in a boma are seldom attacked by lions. Why, no one knows. The beast is always fully aware of man's presence. He studies the boma long and carefully, satisfies himself that no danger need be feared from it, and then turns his attention to the food lying near.

But the conduct of a jungle beast is never predictable. The lion you are trying to snare may have been shot at from a boma before or shot at out in the open. In either case, he may attack. Or he may be just cantankerous, and attack an enemy so close to the food he wants. And if he does, he will penetrate your boma as easily as a Newfoundland dog would plunge through a sheet of newspaper.

No boma yet constructed has been able to keep out an attacking lion. The ordinary boma, such as ours, is not intended to. During the nine-months' raiding by man-eaters of construction camps at Tsavo, on the Uganda Railway line, bomas for the protection of coolies sleeping within were day by day increased to twenty feet in thickness. Yet lions penetrated those twenty feet of closely woven branches. And not only penetrated them, but actually carried in their jaws human victims back through them.

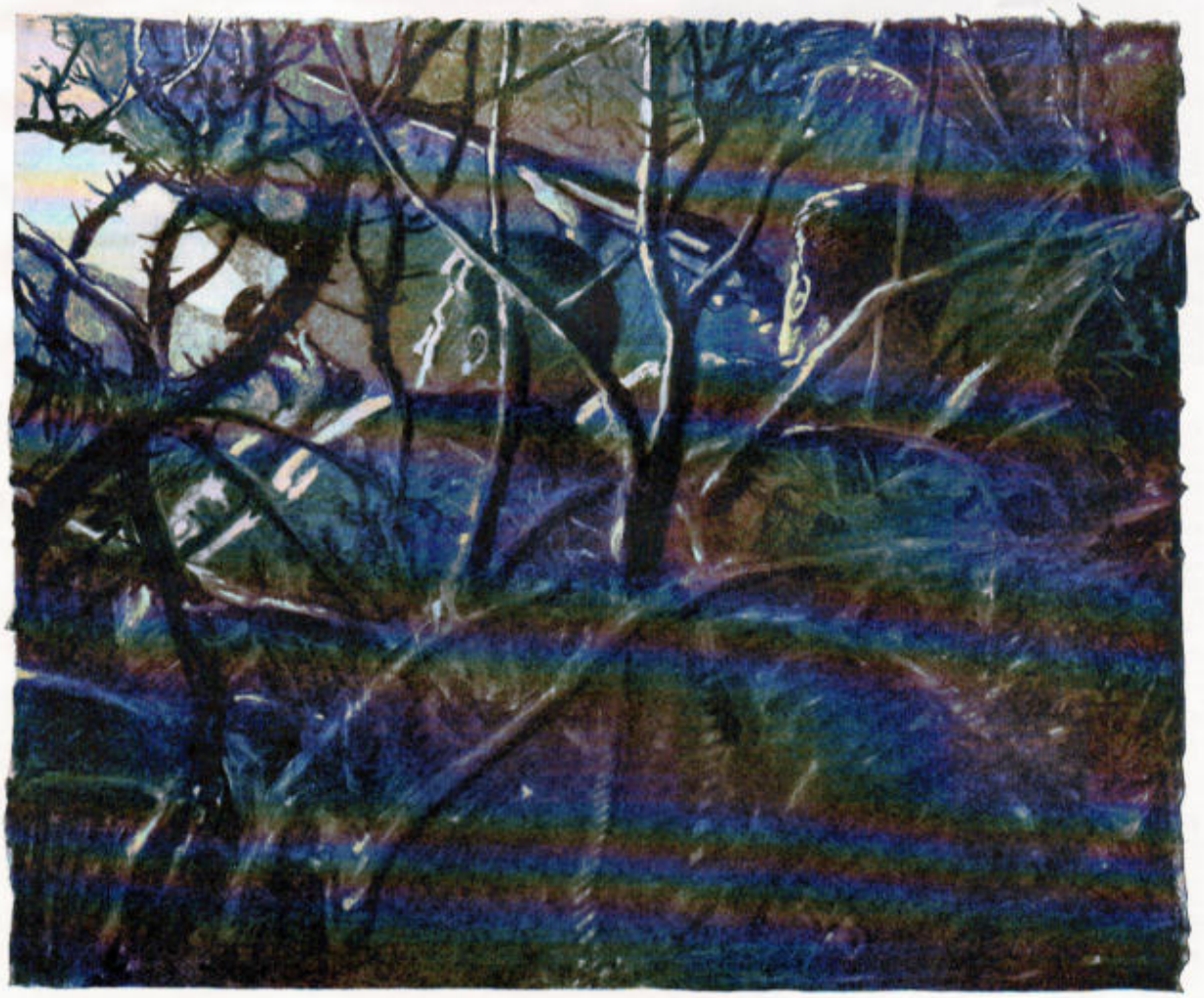
THE space below the unbroken sky-line, on which the dead bullock lumped darkly, was quite black. Anything but a firefly could be moving in it unknown to us, if it moved with the stealth of the African beast.

And then the sky-line was broken, suddenly and silently, by a big dark head, thrusting forward toward the bait from the opposite side of the rise. The head was not shaggy, and no mane was showing. The beast was crouching so close to the ground that the outline of its body was indistinguishable.

Graham moved very slightly. I felt his breath on my cheek.

"Looks like a lioness," he whispered anxiously. "If it is, we're up against it with him on guard outside. Do nothing until we find out. Never guessed he had a mate."

I whispered back that I would wait for the word from him. My sights then crept down from the out-thrust head to the bit of shoulder that *(Continued on page 80)*



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was visible, needling for the vital spot that would necessarily rise before the jaws could touch the waiting meat.

Very slowly the body on the sky-line edged toward the bait. Bit by bit it rose with perplexing slowness. Then a sudden suppressed oath from Graham almost startled me into firing.

"Only a damned hyena," he said. "I might have known it."

As he spoke I recognized the scavenger of the veldt. Now fully on the sky-line, it stood still for a few seconds. Then the head snapped forward. There was a ripping sound as the powerful jaws tore away a mouthful of meat. Instantly the beast dropped out of sight. A minute or two passed and the head appeared again, with a caution that told us just how near was the lion.

Suddenly, in the very act of sinking his teeth again into the meat, the hyena melted away. Graham gave me a warning nudge. Minute after minute dragged past, and the lion still lay low. Strain my ears as I would, I could catch no sound of his movement.

And then at last, as if he had oozed out of the ground, he stood before us on the top of the ridge, clearly outlined against the steely sky. With cat-like swiftness and in uncanny silence he had climbed out of the black space in front of us. Like a big ebony statue he stood motionless, a few feet from the bait, in an attitude of keen alertness, his head up, his rounded ears listening for the faintest warning sound that would send him off again into the night as silently as he had come. He was looking away from us, his position slightly oblique to our line of fire.

"All right," Graham breathed. "And mind you, heart, not head." (Even in daylight a head shot at a lion is always risky, on account of the sharp backward slope of the forehead.)

Forgetting Graham for the moment, I sighted just behind the shoulder and squeezed the trigger. Graham's rifle crashed out at almost the same instant as mine.

With a roar that seemed to shake the ground the lion sprang into the air, as if catapulted from the ridge. The roar was cut short while he was still in midair. We heard the heavy thud as he landed on the opposite side of the rise. It was followed by spasmodic thudding as great paws flailed the ground.

The lion did not roar again, and we knew he was finished. The pounding of the paws did not last long. When it ceased, several deep groans arose. They ended in

a couple of heavy sighs. Then the stillness settled down about our boma again. It seemed to me that only a few seconds had passed between the lion's abrupt appearance and his last sigh.

For some time neither of us spoke. The feeling uppermost in me was one of regret, almost guilt. The great, powerful beast had found us and passed us by. He had stood, the very picture of majesty, on the knoll, as if trusting us to act as he had done, and from the ambush he had spared we had snuffed him out.

When I spoke to Graham, he confessed to a similar feeling. "I wouldn't do this for sport alone," he said. "But I can't afford to lose any more stock."

We dropped our rifles and settled into more comfortable positions, to await dawn and the arrival of the boys. For about an hour we lay smoking and chatting. Then, with the suddenness of a rifle shot, the calm of the night was shattered by a thunderous roar. It sounded very close, though it must have come from several hundred yards away. As we twisted around and grabbed our rifles another roar set the air quivering. Then, for several minutes, one followed another in steady succession.

Not only was such sustained roaring most unusual, but there was a curious quality in it, unlike any lion's voice I had heard before. I listened to it and awaited Graham's comment, which was none too reassuring.

"A hundred to one, that's a lioness," he said. "That fellow must have had a mate after all. Notice that curious note in her roars? There's anger there, all right. But there's something else, too—something that won't do us any good if she comes close enough to the carcass to get our scent.

"She'll charge us?"

"Little doubt about that," was the grim reply. "Keep your eye on the sky-line and be ready to fire at anything that shows above it."

The lull in the roaring lasted for several minutes. Then it broke out with the same fury as before and at apparently the same distance from us. A longer interval of silence followed, perhaps fifteen or twenty minutes, and when the roars were resumed they came from an entirely different quarter.

The beast was moving about rapidly in her rage. Would her swift movements bring her steadily closer to her dead mate? Was she lashing herself into a fury that would eventually send her crashing through our frail shelter? We would be totally helpless if she should approach from any quarter but directly in front of the loop-holes.

STEADILY, at irregular intervals and from different directions, the roaring went on. While it was not a soothing sound, it was vastly more welcome to us than silence, for it told us where the lioness was. When it ceased for a time, every faint sound that was wafted to us was a threat of danger.

But the strongest instinct of the jungle beast—self-preservation—kept her at a distance, and the long hours passed without an attack. With the first gray radiance of dawn we noticed that the voice from the cavernous throat was receding. Each outbreak grew more distant, until the roaring ceased altogether in the heavy bush that rose from the veldt a couple of miles away. The lioness had taken her rage and grief to her lair.

Promptly at sunup the boys arrived and opened a hole in the wall of the boma. We crawled out and crossed the ridge to inspect our kill.

The dead lion was a magnificent beast, apparently in his prime. His only defect was a somewhat scraggy mane, due to his having spent several weeks in the thick bush. He lay on his side, his forepaws

stretched stiffly out. Even in death there was something awesome about him, with his massive head, his thick, powerful paws and the cable-like muscles that ridged his chest and shoulders.

Graham's stock was not again molested. Before I left we were able to prove that our nocturnal serenader had been our victim's mate. Shortly after dawn one morning, a week later, we got her just as she left a water-hole.

That experience cured me of any desire ever again to lurk within a boma. Yet a few weeks later I found myself once more peering into the night through a bushy loop-hole.

Returning from that safari, I stopped at the home of another settler, an old friend named Cameron, who lived near the base of El Donyo Sabuk, a mountain some fifty miles from Nairobi. Full of rage at the loss of several valuable imported sheep, he had just finished building a boma. Daylight hunting he had found useless, since the thief, a single lion, spent his days digesting Cameron's mutton on the densely wooded slopes of the mountain. Much as I disliked the idea, I could not refuse to help him.

Though we placed the bait, the carcass of a native sheep, on top of a rise the usual twelve or fifteen feet from the boma, our chances for sky-line shooting were slight. The long rainy season was at hand, and banks of heavy black clouds had begun to drift across the sky. So we entered the boma equipped with rifles and a powerful electric torch. My job was to handle the flashlight. As an extra precaution, Cameron scattered a number of dead twigs in front of the boma and around the bait.

The usual weary waiting followed the arrival of darkness. Hour after hour passed, with no sign of our expected visitor. The sky was alternately partly clear and almost completely obscured by drifting clouds.

Toward dawn, when successive banks of cloud had piled up to darken the entire sky, we heard one of the twigs snap. With my finger on the button of the torch I waited nervously. Without my rifle in my hands I felt curiously defenseless. A long interval passed before another cracked. The lion was moving with the infinite caution of his kind. We were sure it was the sheep stealer.

A TENSE wait followed, during which we heard the snapping of more twigs. And then, at last, came the unmistakable sound of rending flesh. It was followed by a lapping sound and then a long, deep sigh of satisfaction. The beast was lapping blood from the sheep's entrails, the usual procedure of a feeding lion.

At a signal from Cameron I flashed the torch. The white beam that cut through the inky darkness revealed the great beast lying beside the sheep's carcass on the opposite side from us and almost facing us. One paw was resting on the bait.

Without moving his body he jerked up his head and stared straight into the light. For thirty seconds or more he remained quite motionless, dazzled by the blinding glare. During that time Cameron held his fire, fearing to risk a head shot. Then, in a flash, the lion was on his feet, facing us almost directly. Cameron fired at once, a bit too hastily, as it turned out.

With a wild roar the beast reared straight up on his hind legs. For several seconds he remained upright, swaying grotesquely and clawing at the air with his forepaws. Then he dropped again on all fours, just as Cameron's rifle cracked a second time. The bullet, intended for the heart, missed altogether.

When he dropped, he was momentarily outside the beam of my torch. I picked him up again just as he sprang into the blackness. The brief glimpse I got sent my heart into my mouth, for I saw that he had sprung in our direction.

I dropped the torch in the loop-hole. Providentially, I believe, for its light shone outside, leaving the interior of our enclosure in complete darkness. I got hold of my rifle just as the lion's 600 pounds crashed into the side of the boma with the thud of a falling boulder.

Following the loud cracks as two or three of the upright stakes broke, there was a confused swishing and snapping of the bushy wall, mingled with the lion's deep, furious snarling. Part of the boma's side was thrust down on my legs as I tried to jump up. A half roar, half grunt merged with a final swish, and to our infinite relief the wounded beast was off.

"That was close!" said Cameron in a shaky voice. "Don't know how I came to muff that second shot." His miss was surprising, for Cameron was an old and tried hunter.

I picked up the torch and threw its light on the crushed section of the boma. It was evident that the lion, dazzled by the light, had sprung instinctively and blindly, in the direction he happened to be facing, at the second shot. Had he intended to charge at the light, he would inevitably have crashed into the front of the boma and landed on top of us.

"Will he come back?" I asked, wondering what sort of showing I would make with the light if I tried to hold its beam on a maddened, charging lion.

"No," Cameron replied. "He may make for the side of the mountain. But if he's at all hard hit, he'll most likely make for the nearest cover and stay there."

I SNAPPED out the light, and we sat down with our rifles on our knees to wait for dawn. We had no clear idea what direction the lion had taken. But the nearest cover was a deep, winding donga about half a mile away, in the direction of Donyo Sabuk. Cameron thought he might have made for the shelter of the heavy thickets along its sides and bottom.

In about an hour the black clouds began to turn gray, and shortly afterward the swift equatorial dawn broke. As we stepped outside the boma we saw Cameron's boys racing toward us. As soon as they saw us all began yelling together. We hurried forward to meet them, and from the hubbub finally gathered that they had seen simba in the donga.

We followed them to a point where a heavy, triangular-shaped thicket spread from the lip to the bottom. They had seen the lion enter it, they said. Cameron ordered them to chase him out. We took up positions on the edge of the donga, on either side of the thicket.

The boys fell to with great energy, showering stones and branches into the bush and yelling with all the power of their lungs. Simba stood the ear-splitting din and the steady pelting of his cover for something like ten minutes. Then a deep growl, followed by a shout from Cameron, told me that he was out.

I hurried over to the other side of the cover. The lion, roused to fighting fury, was charging up the steep side of the donga. Escape was open to him, along the bottom or up the opposite side, but he scorned it, preferring to give battle to his enemies crowding above. Nothing but death could stop him now. Cameron's rifle was leveled, but the beast's short, bounding leaps made him a difficult target for an effective shot, close as he was.

Then Cameron fired. The lion pitched sideways, and rolled almost to the bottom of the slope. Immediately his forepaws, digging at the ground, twisted him around to face us again. But it was clear, from the way the hind quarters were trailing, that his back was broken.

Even so, he continued to drag himself forward foot by foot, snarling wickedly.

One of his paws struck a piece of thick limb flung by one of the beaters. He seized it in his jaws and snapped it in two as if it had been a twig.

A head shot from Cameron's rifle finished him. The great-hearted beast died facing his foes, his very last gesture one of fight and defiance.

We found that Cameron's first shot, fired from the boma, had hit high up in the neck. It had done no real damage, but no doubt accounted for the lion's last swift charge. Nine times out of ten an unwounded lion, driven to the open by beaters, will make for new cover.

The third and last night I spent inside a boma brought a touch of the comic. In retrospect, that is, for certainly there was nothing funny about the incident at the time. The stock thief that was bothering a friend of mine had nearly a couple of miles of steep, craggy, almost inaccessible cliffs, full of small caves and crevices, to hide in between forays.

Clarke, my settler friend, gave his boma an original touch. He built it around a tree, whose spreading lower branches almost swept the ground. His idea was to make the leafy branches form a roof, and so exclude even the diffused light of the star-filled sky. Also, the wall of interwoven bush needed to be only about half the usual height. Our bait was the carcass of a kongoni, shot near the spot and dragged by the boys to a rise that gave us an excellent sky-line.

The hours of darkness came and went, and the bait lay undisturbed. When a white, vertical moon lit up the landscape in front of us, we relaxed our vigilance, for lions will rarely approach bait in moonlight. Finally we decided we had drawn a blank for that night, and gave up our watch. We were glad to turn away from the loop-holes and light our pipes.

For some time we lay conversing in low tones. Suddenly Clarke's hand caught my arm, and reached up and jerked the pipe from my mouth. He stopped me with a warning pressure when I started to squirm around to my loop-hole.

I LAY still, listening. Presently I caught the sound that he had heard—a sort of rustling of leaves and snapping of small branches. It seemed to come from the opposite side of the tree, intermittently, and sounded like the noise a small animal would make in climbing up through the branches.

I felt Clarke bending toward me. With his mouth close to my ear he whispered: "Rhino! Don't move or make a sound."

That explained the odd noise. The big beast had ambled up to the tree and was feeding off the tips of the low-lying branches.

Fully alive to the extreme danger we were in, I needed no second warning to keep still, for the rhinoceros almost invariably charges man at sight or smell. His sight is about the poorest in the animal kingdom, but his nose is very keen. If that fellow stayed long enough to get a whiff of us, he would be almost sure to heave his three tons on top of us and trample one or both of us to death, not to speak of what he might do with his 18-inch horn.

Shooting would be out of the question. We could not even count on a lucky chance shot, for our rifles were loaded with soft-nosed bullets, and it takes a jacketed bullet to penetrate a rhino's inch-thick hide. Our only chance would be to shin up the tree-trunk, if we could escape the ponderous feet and reach it. So, powerless to attack or escape, we sat as still as a couple of dead men.

Suddenly the cropping of leaves ceased. There was a moment's silence and then a short, startled grunt. A soft thudding followed, as if the rhino had sheered away from the spot where his nose had caught

a strange smell. Then a loud, explosive snort, exactly like the sound of steam from a shunting locomotive, made both of us jump. After that we heard a quickened, intermittent thudding, punctuated by more blasting snorts. Evidently puzzled or angry, or both, the big beast was lumbering clumsily about, uncertain whether to attack or retreat.

How long we sat, tensely braced for instant movement, I don't know. But at last there was a loud swish, as if the bulging side of the rhino had brushed the boma wall. Immediately there arose a sound like that of an empty barrel being rolled over cobblestones. It quickly receded and died away. The rhino was not only retreating, but actually running way. The odd rumbling sound was the grunting of the rhinoceros as he ran.

Astonishment and relief kept both of us silent for a while. Then Clarke laughed.

"Who says smoking isn't healthy? I'll bet you're wondering what scared him off," he said. "It was the smell of our tobacco smoke."

No doubt that was the explanation of the rhino's sudden flight. Both our pipes had been going for some time, and there must have been quite a bit of smoke slowly drifting out of the boma. Apparently he figured that a potential enemy giving off such a strange, unbeastlike smell was better left alone.