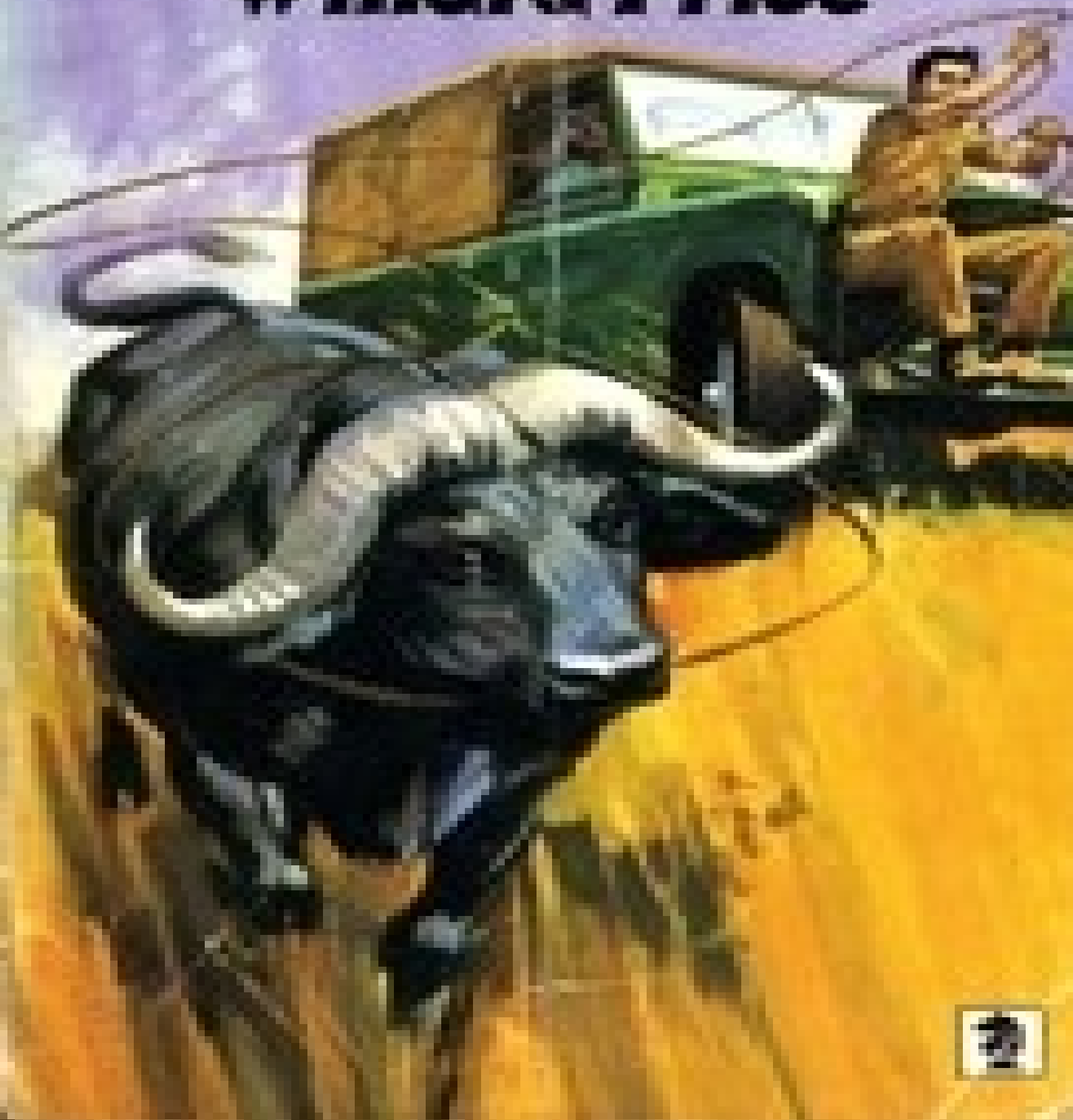


AFRICAN ADVENTURE

Willard Price



African Adventure

By Willard Price

Note

The characters in this story are fictional. The descriptions of the habits of animals, nature of the Leopard Society and customs of the people are factual. The author made frequent journeys in Africa, including seven safaris in big-game country. As a naturalist, he led expeditions for the National Geographic Society and the American Museum of Natural History.

Chapter 1

Leopard in the night

Hal woke with a start. He found himself sitting up in bed, his spine tingling. What had roused him? A cry of some sort.

The play of light and shadow in the tent told him that the camp-fire outside was still burning. It was meant to keep off dangerous visitors. Wild animals were all about -yet the sound he had heard did not seem the voice of an animal.

Still, he could be mistaken. This was his first night in the African wilds. Beside the camp-fire earlier in the evening he and his younger brother, Roger, had listened to the voices of the forest while their Father, John Hunt, told them what they were hearing.

‘It’s like an orchestra,’ Hunt had said. ‘Those high violins you hear are being played by the jackals. That crazy trombone - the hyena is playing it. The hippo is on the bass tuba. Doesn’t that wart-hog’s ‘arnk-arnk-arnk’ sound just like a snare drum? And listen - far away ... you can just hear it, a lion on the ‘cello.’

‘Who’s that with the saxophone?’ asked Roger.

‘The elephant. He’s good on the trumpet too.’

A sharp grinding roar made the boys jump. Whatever made it was very close to the camp. It sounded like a rough file being dragged over the edge of a tin roof.

Roger tried to cover his fright with a joke.

‘Must be Louis Armstrong,’ he said, and the others laughed rather uneasily. It did sound like the gravel voice of the famous jazz singer.

‘Leopard,’ said Hunt. ‘He sounds hungry. I hope he doesn’t come any closer.’

But the sound that had made Hal sit up stiff and startled in his bed was none of these. Now he heard it again - a piercing shriek, followed by the screams of men and women and the barking of dogs. The noise seemed to come from the African village on the hill just behind the camp.

He heard his father’s cot creak. Roger remained fast asleep. Thirteen-year-olds do not wake easily.

‘Better see what the trouble is,’ said John Hunt. He and Hal pulled on their clothes and went out. The African scouts and gun-bearers who had been sleeping around the fire were awake and chattering excitedly.

There was a rushing through the grass just outside the zone of firelight. Hunt put his .375 Magnum to his shoulder. He lowered the gun when he saw that what was emerging was no wild beast but the headman of the village with three of his men.

'Bwana! quick, help us,' he called as he came running, 'The leopard. It has taken one of the children.'

'Come on, Hal,' said Hunt. 'Joro, Mali, Toto - get your guns and come along.' And to the headman, 'Did you pick up its trail?'

'Yes. It went down towards the river.'

'Get a couple of flashlights,' said the senior Hunt. Hal plunged into the tent to grab the electric torches. A sleepy voice came from Roger's bed.

'What's up?'

'We're going hunting.'

'What?' complained Roger. 'In the middle of the night?'

Hal did not wait to explain. He dived out and joined the men already on their way up the hill. Knowing his adventurous younger brother, he was not surprised when Roger came panting up behind. He was still in his pyjamas, having taken time only to put on a pair of boots.

At the edge of the group of thatch-and-mud huts angry villagers milled about, men shouting, women wailing, children crying.

Here the headman pointed out the leopard's trail. Hunt played his torch on the tracks and led the way down the hill towards the river.

Hal noticed that a woman was accompanying them.

'Why is she coming?'

'It was her child,' the headman said.

Half-way down they came upon the child's body. The leopard, frightened perhaps by the commotion, had dropped it and fled. The bare brown skin was deeply cut by teeth and claws, and oozed blood. The woman, with a little cry, gathered up her child. Hunt felt for the pulse.

'Still alive,' he said. And while the sobbing mother turned back to the village with the unconscious child in her arms, Hunt again took up the trail.

'No time to lose,' he said. 'It could have gone a mile by this time. Or it might be lying just here behind a bush, waiting for us. That's one thing you can always expect of a leopard - it will do the unexpected. Watch out'

He stopped, puzzled, where the footprints were indistinct. John Hunt, explorer, collector of wild animals for zoos and circuses, had had long experience in tracking animals - yet he didn't claim to know everything. The best tracker in Africa is not the white man but the African, who from childhood has learned to interpret every turned pebble and every bent blade of grass. The official tracker in Hunt's safari was big black Joro, and Hunt now called his name.

‘Joro, take a look at this.’

There was no answer. Hal swung his light on the men. There were the headman and the three others from the village, there was Mali, and there Toto. And the camp dog, a big Alsatian named Zulu. But no Joro

‘I thought I told him to come,’ said Hunt.

‘You did.’

‘He acts strangely sometimes. Well, no matter - I think this is the way,’ and Hunt led on down the hill

Hunt’s flashlight, strapped to his forehead to leave both hands free in case he had to use his gun, threw a strong shaft of light on the pug marks. Yet John Hunt hesitated. Something was wrong with these footprints. Certainly they had been made by the feet of a leopard. There was no mistaking the impression of the four oval toes and the large triangular heel. But at the tip of each toe-print was a deeper dent, evidently made by the claw. That was odd, because a leopard has movable claws which come out when he is attacking but are drawn back into the toe when he travels. This looked more like the trail of a cheetah, whose claws are always out.

‘But it can’t have been a cheetah,’ he said to Hal. ‘A cheetah would never enter a house and grab a child. These are a leopard’s tracks all right. But the claws wouldn’t be out - not unless the beast was dead.’

‘Dead,’ Hal repeated. He wondered. Could the tracks have been made by dead feet? The idea was fantastic. But this was a land where the fantastic was commonplace.

His sharp eyes noticed something else.

‘Dad,’ he said, ‘there are no blood-stains along this part of the trail.’

His father stopped and gazed at Hal thoughtfully. That was curious. After clawing the body, the leopard’s feet had left a little of the child’s blood in every print. But now, suddenly, there was no more blood. The feet would get dry, but not so quickly. There should be a trace of blood left. He knelt and examined a print at close range. There was not the slightest speck of red. He grinned up at Hal.

‘You’ll be a tracker yet.’

But Roger wasn’t going to let his nineteen-year-old brother walk off with all the honours.

‘There’s something else,’ he said. ‘When we were after that jaguar down on the Amazon - remember - it slid along close to the ground - pressed the grass down flat. Doesn’t a leopard do the same?’

‘Yes, it does,’ admitted his father.

But here nothing of the sort had happened. The grass stood up two feet high between footprints.

Hunt shook his head.

‘Beats me,’ he confessed. ‘But we can’t solve the mystery by standing here. Let’s get along.’

They went on down the slope at a half-run. The headman came up beside John Hunt and poured out the troubles of his village. This was the third child the leopard had taken in the last ten days. The first two had been killed. Every time the leopard grew bolder. The people of the village lived in constant terror.

‘You will kill it?’ he pleaded.

‘I didn’t come to Africa to kill animals,’ John Hunt said. ‘I want to take them alive. But a man-eater deserves to be shot. Don’t worry - we’ll get it one way or another.’

They entered a grove of trees and bushes along the river bank. On they went with tense nerves, knowing very well that the beast might spring out at any moment from a patch of grass or brush, or might drop from an overhanging limb.

‘What’s that - over there, near the doum-palm?’ said Hal. His father directed his forehead light towards the spot. Something was moving, something yellow with dark blotches. Now it stood out plainly, and it was certainly the hide of a leopard. But the thing seemed to be erect like a man. It was leaping for cover. Just before it disappeared from sight it looked back at its pursuers. Its face was a man’s face, but so poorly lit that one could not clearly see the features.

Now it was gone. The hunters reached the place where it had been seen, and fanned out in all directions. But the beast, or man, or whatever it might be, seemed to have vanished into thin air.

Chapter 2

The leopard-man

Even the tracks had disappeared, hidden by the tangle of brush and grass. No one knew what to do next. The men from the village plainly did not want to go farther. A leopard was bad enough. But a leopard that could change into a man was an evil spirit. It could appear and disappear at will, and no gun or arrow could hurt it. So they believed, and trembling with fear they were ready to call it a night and go back to the village.

‘But how about your children?’ Hunt said. ‘Are you willing to let them be taken, one after another?’

‘There is nothing we can do,’ said the headman. ‘And nothing you can do. A leopard can be killed, but not a leopard-man. Come - you will return with us to the village. You have lights - we dare not go back in the dark. Listen, he laughs at us.’

From the depths of the wood came a harsh, grating, coughing sound that only a terrified imagination could interpret as a laugh. It was like the rasp of a saw through coarse wood.

‘That fellow, whoever he is,’ said Hunt, ‘can certainly give a good imitation of a leopard. I’m going after him. You can come along, or stay here, just as you like.’

He and the boys set off in the direction of the sound, and the Africans unwillingly followed. Scrambling through brush, over logs and around trees, they chased the ‘evil spirit’ and hoped it would not be there when they arrived. The two torches, worn by Hal and his father, cast their beams far in among the trees, searching for something in yellow and black.

Hal stopped. ‘I think I see him. Up on a branch, just to the left of that anthill.’

Hunt strained his eyes. Yes, he could just make out something yellow and black, probably the skin disguising the figure of the leopard-man.

The dog Zulu growled softly and began to run ahead.

‘Wait, Zulu,’ Hunt ordered. ‘Come back.’ The dog reluctantly obeyed, still growling.

‘Now that’s strange,’ said Hunt. ‘When we saw the leopard-man before, Zulu was quiet. Now she’s all excited. Why the change?’

‘If we go straight for the leopard-man he’ll run, just as he did before,’ Hal said. He took off his light and gave it to Roger. ‘Stay here and keep the light shining on him. I’ll sneak round and come up behind him. I think I can wrestle him off that branch. And I have a knife I can use if necessary.’

‘Don’t use it unless you have to,’ said his father. ‘Remember, this is just a man and we have no warrant to kill him. I must say his actions are suspicious. But all we can do is arrest him and turn him over to the police for questioning.’

The headman objected. 'Your son must not do this. He is strong, but he has no magic. The leopard-man will turn into a leopard and kill him.'

But Hal had already crept out into the dark and was making a wide circle round the crouching figure on the branch. Hunt had little fear for his safety. He knew that his six-foot son, with muscles like steel springs, stood a good chance against any human enemy. As for the notion that the leopard-man might turn into a leopard, he had no patience with any such superstition. He noticed that Zulu had followed Hal. The two of them should be able to give a good account of themselves against the mysterious stranger. The impatient dog kept pressing on. Hal warned her. 'Easy, Zulu, don't be in a hurry.' Now they came out on the river bank. The stars glinted down on the smooth surface. Those slow-moving masses on the other shore were hippos. Almost under Hal's feet a crocodile that had been resting with its head on the bank switched about and dived.

They came up silently behind the tree. It was an ancient baobab with a huge trunk, probably hollow inside. They slipped round it until they could see the dark form on the branch. A strong smell penetrated their nostrils. Hal remembered the same smell in a zoo coming from the leopard's cage. But, he reminded himself, this was no leopard but only a man.

The eager dog went into action first. With a savage growl she leaped for the branch. At the same instant the thing on the branch leaped at the dog and they met in mid air. Hal realized with a sickening shock that this was no human being but a full-grown leopard. Zulu would not last ten seconds under those terrible jaws and claws. The two animals fell to the ground, the leopard's teeth around Zulu's neck.

Hal drew his knife and closed in to rescue the dog. The two bodies whirled about so fast that it was hard to distinguish between the dog and the big cat. Hal's knife might find the wrong animal. Then a strange thing happened. The leopard, with a howl of pain, released its jaws from the dog's throat. Zulu's collar, covered with heavy, brass studs as sharp as nails, had saved her. The points had stabbed the palate of the leopard and made it relax its hold.

Now it turned on an enemy it could hope to conquer more easily, and Hal felt the full crash of the leopard's body against his own, striking him with such force that he tumbled backwards into the water. The impact had sent the knife flying from his hand. By instinct he gulped a lungful of air, just as he and the beast plunged beneath the surface. He felt the savage claws tearing at his clothing and biting into the flesh. He knew that a leopard's claws can do far more damage than a lion's, because a lion mauls with his front feet only, while a leopard uses all four at once. And teeth as well.

Probably his father and the others were now on the bank, but there was little they could do to help. He must work this out for himself. He hooked his foot under a waterlogged branch that lay on the river bottom, and so held himself and his quarry under water. Could he drown the beast? Or would he himself drown first?

He had had a good deal of experience during his underwater adventures in the Pacific. From his Polynesian friends in the South Seas he had learned how to last a good three minutes without coming up for air.

He had no idea whether a leopard could do better than that, or not so well. He clutched the animal's throat, trying to hold the head well away so that the powerful jaws could not reach his face. But he

could do nothing about those ripping claws. Curiously enough, they did not hurt. Later on they would and plenty.

Staying down three minutes without exertion is one thing. Staying down three minutes while locked in a life-and-death struggle with a big cat is something else. Hal was getting winded. But the leopard was not doing too well either - the fight had almost gone out of it and now it was only anxious to get away. Hal grimly held on. His enemy's struggles grew weaker. If he could just hold the creature down one minute more...

He had forgotten about the crocodiles. The swish of a powerful tail close by reminded him. A crocodile would ordinarily think twice about attacking a man - but attracted by blood it might think only once, or not at all.

Hal loosed his foot and came to the surface. His head emerged and he took air, but he still held the leopard's head under water. A beam of light from the shore struck him and he heard his father's voice. Then both his father and Roger leaped in beside him and hauled him ashore, his hands still gripping the motionless leopard's throat. They dragged the beast up on to the bank and Hal put his hand over the heart. The leopard was dead.

'How about you?' Hunt asked. 'Did you get badly mauled?'

'Only scratched,' Hal said, still too excited to feel his wounds.

The Africans were happy and terrified. Happy that the killer of their children was dead, terrified that it might come alive again in human form.

The limp body lay on the river bank. Not one of the Africans would touch it. When Roger went towards it the headman said sharply:

'Keep away. It is still full of magic'

Hunt studied the worried face of the headman.

'You really believe that, don't you? You went to a Christian mission school, you speak English, you learned something about science - and you are afraid of a dead leopard.'

'My friend,' smiled the headman, 'not all wisdom is to be found in school. Our knowledge is passed down to us from our father and grandfathers. We have always known what you have learned for the first time tonight - you have seen it for yourself. The leopard became a man and the man became a leopard. And all the time it was neither man nor leopard, but an evil spirit.'

Roger, under the spell of the night and the strange things that had happened, was staring at his father with open mouth.

'Perhaps there's something in it, Dad. It's all been so crazy I could believe almost anything.'

His father grinned. 'I don't blame you. But perhaps it isn't quite as mysterious as it seems. I think I'm beginning to see through it. You remember when we were following the tracks from the village and they became lost in the grass, and when we found them again they seemed peculiar. At the point of

each toe-print there was a claw mark. But a live leopard doesn't keep his claws out when he walks. Those prints were made by dead feet.'

Roger's jaw hung a little farther open. Was his father going a bit barmy?

'Dead feet,' his father went on. 'The paws of a dead leopard strapped to the feet of a man. You remember that the grass wasn't flattened down as it would be by a leopard. It stood two feet high, as would if a man's legs had brushed through it. That man was trying to mislead us so that we shouldn't find the real leopard. Later we saw the man - dressed in a leopard skin.'

'But why - why should he try to lead us off - and why does he dress like a leopard?'

'Because he belongs to the Leopard Society. That's a band of killers. It's not so active here in Uganda but we are very close to the Congo border and it's strong in the Congo and all through Central and West Africa. It's a very secret society. When a man joins it he is given a leopard skin to wear, leopard's paws for his feet, and steel hooks strapped to his fingers so that he can claw his victims. He is taught that he can actually change into a leopard at will. And since he belongs to the leopards, he must defend all leopards. He must kill anybody he is ordered to kill. Especially he must kill anyone who kills a leopard.'

Roger's forehead was puckered with the effort to understand all this.

'So he led us off the leopard's trail,' he said. 'Then we saw him - and he ran. But when we found him again he had changed into a leopard.'

His father smiled. 'He didn't change into anything. He was a man, and is a man. Then we heard the real leopard,

and Hal stalked it. And there it is.' He glanced at the dead animal on the bank.

'And where's the leopard-man?'

'Who knows? Probably skulking around in these woods waiting for his chance to do us in for killing his brother beast.'

'A comforting thought,' said Hal. 'Let's get out of here.'

Chapter 3

Mystery of the missing tracker

As they turned to go, a flash of one of the lights revealed two more leopards - but very small ones - emerging from a hole in the trunk of the baobab and running to their dead mother to suckle. Mewing like oversize kittens, they nuzzled against the quiet, wet body.

‘Poor little duffers,’ Hunt said. ‘We’ll take them back to camp and see if we can’t fix up some substitute for mother’s milk.’

‘Let me carry them,’ said Roger. ‘Will they claw me?’

‘Not likely. They’re too young to be afraid of you.’

Roger, a little gingerly, with a proper respect for both claws and jaws, gathered up the two babies, one in each arm.

‘And we’ll take the big cat too,’ Hunt said. ‘Some museum will be glad to get that skin.’ He signalled to the Africans to take up the body. When they showed no sign of obeying, he did not press them.

‘Well, Hal, it’s up to us.’ He drew some cord from the pocket of his bush-jacket and tied the feet together, while Hal found a fallen branch that could be used as a pole. The pole was run through between the looped feet, and with Hal at one end and his father at the other, the 100-pound cat was raised from the ground and began its journey to camp. The two lights were kept sweeping here and there, on guard lest the leopard-man should be lying in ambush.

‘And how about the male?’ said Hal. ‘Isn’t he apt to pounce on us when he sees us carrying off his family?’

‘A male lion would be after us in a minute,’ said Hunt. ‘But a male leopard isn’t a family man. After he’s started things off, he lets mamma take care of the children and herself. He’s probably miles away hunting.’

Roger, carrying the cubs, was suddenly startled by a cold nose against his wrist. He expected to feel teeth next, for this must be the father of the cubs. Should he drop the little animals and run? He peered down into the gloom. The animal he saw was not quite like a leopard - no, it was just the big Alsatian Zulu.

The dog was a handsome female, owned by Mali. Though a lady, Zulu was every bit as strong, courageous and beautiful as a male. And she went beyond a male in her affection for anything small on four wobbly legs. Before coming on this safari, she had had to leave a litter of pups. Unable to mother them, she now seemed to want to mother the leopard cubs, and kept sniffing at them and nuzzling her nose into -their fur as she trotted alongside.

It was a relief to come out of the dangerous dark into the warm glow of the camp-fire lighting up the

circle of tents.

‘Bring a cage for the cubs,’ Hunt said. ‘A large one, so they’ll have plenty of room to play.’

Mali and Toto hauled down a lion cage from one of the trucks. Hunt padded a large clothes-basket with a warm blanket and pushed it into one corner of the cage. Then the cubs were introduced to their new home. Just before the door was closed, Zulu slipped into the cage.

‘Come out of there,’ commanded Mali. But the dog whined and retreated to the far side.

‘Suppose you let her stay,’ suggested Hunt. ‘Let’s see what she has on her mind.’

Mali closed the door. Zulu, with ears cocked forward, studied the two balls of fur. She sat on her haunches and seemed to be lost in thought. Then she came forward and sniffed at each in turn. They did not seem exactly like pups, but they were just as helpless. Certainly they needed somebody to look after them.

She went over by the basket. Looking back at the cubs, she gave out a series of little yipping barks which plainly said, ‘Come here!’ The cubs did not understand. They lay quiet and frightened on the cold, hard floor of the cage.

With a business-like air, Zulu walked to one of the cubs, gripped the fur at the back of the neck in her teeth, and lifted the squirming animal from the floor. She seemed to find it a bit heavier than she had expected. She carried it to the basket and laid it down on the blanket. Then she brought the other cub and laid it beside the first. There was still room in the large basket for herself. She stepped into it, lay down in a half-circle, and drew both cubs against her. After a protesting mew or two, they snuggled close to her, evidently enjoying the warmth of her body, because an African night, even near the Equator, can be cold.

In the meantime Hunt was treating the scratches on Hal’s arms and chest. Luckily Hal’s heavy bush-jacket had prevented the claws from going very deep.

‘Just scratches,’ Hal said. ‘Never mind them.’

‘‘Just a scratch’ from a leopard’s claw can be serious if it isn’t attended to,’ his father told him. ‘The claws can be highly poisonous, because the leopard eats dead animals and particles of the decaying flesh remain in the claws. Hold steady.’

He cleaned out the wounds with boiled water and applied a strong antiseptic. Mali returned from a search in the bushes with some leaves and roots which he proceeded to pound until they gave out a thick, white milk. This was smeared on as a poultice and covered with bandages.

But one cut in the left arm was too deep and wide for such treatment. It had to be sewn up, and Hunt, searching through his medical kit, discovered that his supply of catgut thread needed for sutures was exhausted.

‘We will use ants,’ suggested Mali. Hunt had often heard of this art, for it is practised by primitive tribes all over the world, but he had never seen it done. He watched with great interest as Mali poked into one of the anthills so common in Africa and stirred up the white ants, better known as termites,

until the warriors rushed out. He seized one of these and squeezed it until its jaws opened wide. With skilful fingers he drew together the edges of the cut in Hal's arm, then placed the open jaws one on either side of the cut, where they bit savagely like two pincers, completely closing the wound. He broke off the ant's body, leaving the head in place and the jaws locked. They would remain locked until the wound healed, when the ant-jaw stitches could be removed.

More ants were used in the same way until a row of heads extended the full length of the cut. Hal and his father looked on with admiration as the skilful black fingers put the last ant-clamp in place, then applied the milky poultice and a final bandage.

Wounds so treated generally heal without difficulty, but Hunt took the added precaution of giving Hal a strong hypodermic injection of penicillin.

No one thought it worth while to go to bed, for dawn was already streaking the east with rose and silver.

One of the mysteries of the night had not yet been solved. What about the tracker, Joro? He had been ordered to go along on the hunt. But when he was needed to read the tracks, he was not there. Why had he stayed in camp? Or had he stayed in camp?

'Tell Joro I want to see him,' John Hunt told the cook, who was going round from tent to tent with cups of steaming coffee.

'Joro is not here, bwana'

'But he must be here. He didn't go with us.'

The cook seemed surprised. 'He wasn't with you? Where else could he have been?'

'That's exactly what I want to know. There he is now.'

The cook turned and looked across the camp ground. Joro was just coming out of the bushes. Evidently hoping he would not be seen in the half-dark of dawn, he crept like a cat to his tent and slipped inside. As usual, his chest and back were bare, his only garment a well-worn pair of safari pants. He seemed to carry some sort of bundle under his arm.

'Ask him to come here,' said Hunt.

When Joro came, Hunt was impressed by the drawn, haggard face and hate-filled eyes of his tracker. It was not the first time he had noticed this bitterness in the man's face, but it had never been so marked as now. But Joro was a good tracker, and this was the first time he had definitely disobeyed orders.

'Joro,' said Hunt, 'I asked you to go with us last night. Didn't you hear me?'

Joro answered sullenly, 'I didn't hear you.'

'Where were you all night?'

'Here, of course.'

‘But they say you were not in the camp.’

‘They are mistaken. I was in my tent, asleep.’

‘But I saw you come out of the brush just a few minutes ago.’

‘Yes, bwana. I went out early to look for you.’

Hunt saw that this line of questioning was getting nowhere.

‘Joro,’ he said, ‘what do you know about the Leopard Society?’

That question went home. Joro was visibly shaken. His voice was unsteady as he replied, ‘I know nothing of it, bwana.’

It was plain that he was deeply disturbed. Hunt was sorry for him. He could not answer this man’s ha with hate, for he was not a hating man. He realized that Joro was somehow in the grip of terrible forces and the good and bad in him were struggling against each other. Here was a man to be pitied and helped, not feared or fought. Joro, shifting uneasily from one foot to the other, said, ‘May I go now?’

‘Joro,’ said Hunt kindly, ‘you are in trouble. You don’t want to tell me what it is. That’s quite all right. But remember, in this camp you are among friends. If you ever need us, all you have to do is ask.’

‘I won’t need you,’ Joro said with a sudden flash of anger, and left the tent.

Chapter 4

Cubs' breakfast

Hunt went out into the morning sunshine and breathed deeply. The air was sweet with the scent of dew on the grass and all the better for the fragrance of bacon and eggs cooking over the open fire. Hal and Roger joined him. Together they looked at the miracle that is fresh every morning in the African big-game country.

In the low rays of the just-risen sun the animals were coming down to the river to drink.

Animals, animals, animals, of every shape and form, animals by the hundred, by the thousand, were on the move.

'I never dreamed it would be like this,' Hal said.

'No one can believe it until he actually sees it,' said Hunt. 'Every time I come to Africa it strikes me as hard as it did at first. You often read nowadays that wild life is disappearing, and it's true in a way but you can see that there's a lot of it left.'

'Looks as if all the zoos in the world had just been let loose,' said Roger, as he made a complete turn about, his eyes sweeping over a sea of bobbing heads, every head containing the same thought - breakfast-Nibbling at shrubs or high grass as they went, or seizing smaller animals if they were meat eaters, they ambled down towards the river. On the other side of the river, too, they could be seen coming down from the hills to meet at the river's bank.

Hunt pointed out those that passed close to the camp, and named them. The big eland was cram-full of dignity and majesty. The graceful, streamlined impala was full of fun, jumping six feet high over bushes instead of troubling to go round them. The ungainly wildebeest (in crossword puzzles it is called the gnu) flounced about awkwardly like a fat old lady trying to do the twist. The little duiker (which means diver, because he dives through brush) did not go round bushes like the stately eland, nor leap over them like the impala, but plunged straight through.

And still they came - zebras frisking like horses, long-faced hartebeest, springing klipspringers, dik-diks almost small enough to put in your pocket, waterbuck, bush-buck, kob, oryx, and those lovely gazelles which they would see all over East Africa, the Grants and the Tommies.

A giraffe went by, his long neck angling into the sky like a derrick. He paused to pick some tender young leaves from the top of a tree. Then he went on to the river. How would he get that high head of his down to the water?

The giraffe lowered his head, but even when it was as far down as he could get it, it was still several feet above the surface. He knew by instinct how to solve that problem. He spread his front feet wide apart so that his body slanted down from tail to neck like the roof of a house. Then his lowered head easily reached the water. Every gulp ran up his neck in a bulge as big as a cricket ball.

'Lions!' exclaimed Roger. Two big, tawny beasts with heavy manes, who looked as if they belonged in Trafalgar Square, walked along with heads down.

What seemed strange to Roger was that gazelles and waterbuck a few feet away from the lions paid no attention to them.

'Why aren't they afraid?' asked Roger. 'I thought all animals were afraid of lions.'

'See those sagging bellies?' Hunt said. 'The lions have eaten during the night. They are full and satisfied, and the antelopes know it. So why should they be afraid?'

One of the lions let out a sudden roar that seemed to shake the ground. Roger expected to see him spring upon one of the passing animals. Surely his father must be wrong; a roar like that must mean business. But the animals still gave no heed to the King of Beasts. Hunt saw the bewildered look on his son's face.

'A lion roars after he has had his dinner,' Hunt said. 'Perhaps it's his way of saying thank you. It means he is satisfied, content with himself and with the world. If you hear a lion roar during the night you don't need to be scared. It's the lion that doesn't roar that you need to be afraid of. When a lion is hungry he creeps up on his victim without making a sound.'

Until now all the animals had politely gone round the camp, not through it. But suddenly two huge black objects that seemed as big as locomotives came blundering straight into the camp ground. They squashed one of the tents, and two Africans popped out of it squealing with terror.

The two monsters went straight on through the camp-fire, kicking pots and pans in all directions and splattering eggs, bacon, and coffee over themselves and the astonished cook. Out they went on the other side and down through the bushes to the river. A troop of terrified baboons fled out of their path and went galumphing into the woods where the leopard and her cubs had been found the night before.

It is easy to scare an African, but after the danger is over he just as easily laughs. And now the whole camp rang with laughter over the confusion that had been caused by the two living locomotives.

As they cackled and giggled, they went to work putting up the badly battered tent, and the cook collected his

kitchenware, raked together the scattered embers of his fire, and started all over again to prepare breakfast. But everyone kept a sharp eye out for more rhinos.

'Why did they barge through the camp?' Hal wondered.

'They probably didn't even realize there was a camp,' Hunt said. 'Rhinos are just about the stupidest animals in Africa. They have very poor eyesight. Those two brutes probably didn't see the tents or the fire. They simply knew there was a river down below, and nothing was going to stop them from getting to it.'

A plaintive mew came from the cage of the baby leopards. The dog had been let out earlier to take her morning run. Now she was back, looking into the cage and whining softly. The two cubs stood on their hind feet, with forefeet clawing the wire screen as they looked out at her and mewed.

~~‘How about breakfast for the cubs?’ said Roger.~~

‘That’s a bit of a problem,’ his father said. ‘They need their mother’s milk, but since she is dead we have to mix up some powdered milk. Then we’ll warm it a little over the fire.’

This was easily done. But it was not so easy to work out how to get the warm milk into the cubs. Some was poured into a dish and placed inside the cage. The cubs smelt it eagerly but evidently had no idea of how to lap it up.

‘What we need is a couple of feeding-bottles with rubber nipples that they can suck, just as they have been used to feeding from their mother. But I’m afraid we won’t find anything like that in camp.’

‘Can’t we spoon-feed them?’ said Roger.

‘We’ll try it.’

Roger opened the cage and drew out one of the cubs. It wriggled and snarled, but did not try to bite or extend its claws. Roger held it firmly while his father placed his hand beneath the jaw, and pressed his thumb into one cheek and fingers into the other. That would open a cat’s jaws, or a dog’s. But the leopard’s jaws were too strong and remained tightly closed.

Now Hal got into the act. While Roger held the animal and his father poised the spoon, Hal took hold of the upper and lower jaws, confident that he could pull them apart.

They would not budge. All the strength of the small animal seemed to be concentrated in those jaws.

Suddenly it wrenched its head about and sent the milk flying. Milk dripped from the little whiskers, but the jaws were still clamped shut.

Hal laughed. ‘Funny thing, when three big men can’t make one small cat take its breakfast.’

Zulu was nuzzling the ball of golden brown fur with her nose and whimpering softly.

‘What’s the matter, Zu?’ said Roger. ‘What are you trying to say?’

Hunt studied the dog. ‘I think I know,’ he said. He called Mali, the dog’s owner. ‘Mali, didn’t you say that Zu has just had pups?’

‘It is so, bwana.’

‘Then perhaps she’s still in milk. She seems to have adopted these little rascals. Perhaps she wants to feed them. Put the cub back into the cage. Roger, and let’s see what happens. Leave the door open.’

Zu, with a little bark, followed the cub into the cage, put one and then the other into the basket, got in herself, and lay down.

But nothing happened. The small animals turned away from the dog. One of them began to climb out of the basket.

‘They need a little coaching,’ Hunt said.’

He went into the cage on his knees, took both cats by the nape of the neck, turned them about, and pressed their noses close to the food supply that was waiting for them. The cubs tried to wriggle out of his grip. When they found they could not, they relaxed. Their sense of smell gradually won them over to this unfamiliar foster-mother and they began to lick, then to suckle greedily.

Hunt could now let go and crawl out of the cage, and the cubs’ breakfast continued with many little gurgling sounds of satisfaction. Roger was about to close the cage door, but his father said, ‘I don’t think you need to. Now that they know where they can find their dinner, they won’t run away.’

When their meal was finished, the two cubs stretched themselves out contentedly and purred like organs. The dog began to lick their woolly hides.

‘Getting their morning bath,’ Roger said.

‘It looks like that,’ Hunt replied. ‘Actually what it does is to massage the muscles and aid digestion. Many animal mothers do it by instinct, without knowing why - dogs, leopards, lions, antelopes, and others.’

Roger admired his two pets - he considered them his. Their fur was like dark gold. They didn’t look much like leopards. The circles and spots that mark the grown-up leopard were as yet only soft blurs they would appear more plainly as the animals grew older. The whiskers, still short, would become long and bristly. The greenish-yellow eyes were fierce, but not so fierce as they would be. The teeth and jaws were already bigger than a grown man’s. But the way each little cat staggered around on awkward paws showed that it was still very much of a baby.

‘Can we keep them until they grow up?’ Roger asked.

‘No. They will have to go to a zoo where they can be cared for properly. Grown leopards don’t make good pets.’

‘Why not? These little fellows aren’t bad-tempered. They haven’t put their claws out once. And a leopard doesn’t grow very large - like a lion.’

‘But they don’t keep that sweet disposition when they get older,’ Hunt said. ‘No matter how kindly they are treated, they finally turn savage. A lion or an elephant can be your friend for life - but not a leopard. Something in their nature makes them suspect and hate everything else that moves. And the leopard is very strong. Zoologists say that it is the strongest animal for its size on earth. A leopard is a wonderful climber. It can run up a tree as fast as you can run on the level. When it kills an animal, it drags the body up a tree and puts it in the cleft of a high branch so that lions and hyenas can’t get at it. Many times game wardens have reported seeing a leopard shinny up a tree dragging a waterbuck or a zebra three times as heavy as itself. Sounds impossible, but they’ve proved it by shooting the leopard and weighing the carcasses. And a leopard is more bold than other animals. Ask the villagers. They are more afraid of the leopard than of anything else. A lion won’t come into a house, and an elephant can’t - but a leopard thinks nothing of creeping in through a door or window and seizing the first living thing it finds.’

‘Then why don’t the game scouts go out and kill all the leopards?’

‘A good question,’ his father agreed. ‘The answer is that in the scheme of nature the leopard has its place. For one thing, it keeps down the baboons. The leopard is very fond of baboon meat. If it weren’t for leopards, there would soon be such vast numbers of baboons that every farmer’s field would be stripped clean of every growing thing, and troops of baboons would become so bold that they would make raids upon village people and kill hundreds of them. That very thing has happened in parts of the country where there were no leopards.’

Roger swatted a tsetse fly that had lit on his hand. He looked at his father with mischief in his eyes.

‘Well Dad, if everything is good for something, tell me what’s good about a tsetse?’

Hunt grinned. ‘You think you’ve got me there, you young rascal. All right, I’ll tell you what’s good about a tsetse. First I’ll admit it’s the most dangerous fly in the world, because its bite can give you sleeping sickness. That can happen, but usually doesn’t - most tsetse bites are harmless. But the good thing about this bad fly is that without it you wouldn’t be looking now at thousands of wild animals. They just wouldn’t be here.’

‘How’s that?’

‘I remember once I was making a trip through the Tsavo game reserve with the warden and I swatted a tsetse. He said to me, ‘Don’t kill the tsetse. It’s our best friend. Without the tsetse we wouldn’t have any game park.’ I understood what he meant. The Africans raise millions of cattle and the cattle roam all over the land eating the grass right down to the roots, so that there is nothing left for the wild animals. But there is one place where the cattle can’t go. They can’t go into any area inhabited by tsetse flies, because the tsetse bite is deadly to cattle. So those parts of the country are left for the wild animals to enjoy.’

‘But don’t the flies kill the wild animals, too?’

‘No. The wild animals have been living with the tsetse for so many hundreds of years that they have become immune to tsetse bite - they are used to it, and it doesn’t hurt them. You notice this village has no cattle. That’s because this is a tsetse belt. Of course cattle are good to have, but it’s also good to have some places left where the most wonderful animals in all the world have a chance to exist.’

Roger looked at the dead leopard which the men were beginning to skin. ‘Too bad we had to kill that one.’

‘Yes. But when they become man-eaters, we have to do something about it.’

‘Who gets that skin?’

‘The American Museum in New York has ordered one. If they don’t want it, some furrier will be glad to get it’

‘What’s it worth?’

‘About two hundred and thirty pounds.’

‘How many skins like that does it take to make a fur coat?’

‘About eight.’

Roger whistled. ‘That makes a coat cost eighteen hundred pounds.’

‘More than that. The furrier wants to make a profit. He would sell a leopard-skin coat for two thousand five hundred pounds more or less, depending on the quality of the fur. This fur was out of fashion for a while but now it has come back strong. Probably because it’s hard to get Leopards are becoming scarce. Of course, nobody needs to pay that much to keep warm. A lady with less expensive tastes can buy an ocelot coat for thirteen hundred pounds, cheetah for one thousand pounds, jaguar for three hundred and fifty pounds. Leopard fur is the strongest and most durable.’

Breakfast was ready now, and the hungry hunters fell to with a will. Zulu came out of the cage to get her share, Everyone was much too interested in bacon and eggs and hot biscuits and coffee to notice the cubs until Roger cried:

‘They’re out. They’re running away.’

But the little leopards were not running away. Instead, they waddled in pursuit of their foster-mother. They rubbed against her legs and licked her fur. They sniffed at her dish of meat and turned away. This was not their idea of good food. They were friendly little beasts. One of them scrambled up into Roger’s lap and licked his face with a tongue that felt like coarse sandpaper. In no time at all it had rubbed off the skin and drawn blood.

‘Ouch!’ cried Roger. ‘You’re just too good to me,’ and he pushed the woolly ball down into his lap.

But the little bundle of energy showed surprising strength. He threw off Roger’s hand and leaped up on the camp table, one paw splashing into Hal’s fried eggs and the other into a cup of coffee.

He was captured and placed on the ground, where he set to work licking off his wet paws.

In the meantime, the other cub had disappeared.

‘It can’t be far away,’ Hunt said. ‘Look in the tents.’

The men dived into the tents and searched in corners and under cots and even in the canvas bath-tubs but found no cub. They came out and searched the grass and bushes around the camp, with no result.

Then Roger happened to look up into the foliage of a tree that stood just inside the circle of tents. There was the cub, lying perfectly still on a low branch, watching with bright eyes as these silly humans ran here and there hunting for him. Now he really looked like a leopard rather than just a ball of woolly fur. His little claws gripped the branch. There was an almost savage blaze in his yellow-green eyes. He was ready to spring on anything passing below. This was something he had never been taught, but something that leopards had done for thousands of years, and the instinct was planted deep in his nerves and brain.

Chapter 5

The unlucky Colonel Bigg

It was just Colonel Bigg's bad luck that he should choose this moment to walk into camp. The leopard perched high where he could get a good view, was the first to see him. The mischievous little beast crouched low, dug his claws into the branch and prepared to leap upon the newcomer.

Colonel Bigg did not see the ball of fur on the branch. He saw only the tents and a fire and men. And he smelt bacon and eggs. And he was hungry.

While he was still hidden by the bushes, he stopped to spruce himself up. He removed his hat, took a comb from his pocket, and combed his hair. He smoothed the kinks out of his hat, replaced it on his head, and tipped it at just the right angle. After all, he was a White Hunter, or pretended to be, and must look the part. He straightened his bush-jacket and brushed the dust from his safari shorts.

He puffed out his chest like a pouter pigeon and tried to look important. That was not too easy, since he was not important. It so happened that Colonel Benjamin Bigg, White Hunter, was not a colonel and not a White Hunter.

He had owned a farm in Northern Rhodesia, but he was not a good farmer. He had gone bankrupt and lost his farm. While he was wondering what to do next, a man suggested, 'Why don't you become a White Hunter?'

It was an exciting idea. He, a White Hunter!

When a wealthy American, or German, or anybody, wants to go hunting big game in Africa, he hires a White Hunter to go with him, a man who knows the country, knows where to find the animals, and knows how to shoot.

When out on safari (a hunting trip) it is the White Hunter who bosses the expedition, sees that the camp is supplied with food, tracks the elephant or buffalo or lion, and tells the sportsman when to fire. If the sportsman only wounds the beast and it charges him, it is the White Hunter who must save his client's life by bringing down the enraged beast with a bullet in the heart or brain. When the sportsman poses for his picture with rifle in hand and one foot on the dead beast, the White Hunter has the right to pose beside him.

It's a proud life, a wonderful life. Who wouldn't want to be a White Hunter?

'But it's not for me,' Bigg said. 'I don't know a thing about hunting.'

'Now don't tell me that,' said his friend. 'Haven't you ever shot anything?'

'Only a jack-rabbit. And it got away.'

'No matter. You don't need to be able to shoot. Your client will do the shooting.'

‘Suppose he misses?’

Tell your gun-bearers beforehand to be ready to shoot. Then if your sportsman misses, you and your gun-bearers blaze away all at the same time. One of them is bound to hit home, and who’s going to say it wasn’t you?’

‘But I wouldn’t know where to take anybody to find game.’

‘What of it? Your Africans will know. Leave it to them. Let them do the work and you take the credit.’

It sounded good. Bigg smiled. ‘How do I get started in this racket?’

‘Put an advertisement in one of the sport magazines. You know - ‘Professional hunter, long experience, expert shot, results guaranteed’ - then give your name and address. Oh, there’s one more thing. You ought to have a handle to your name.’

‘Like what?’

‘Captain or major or something. Makes it easier to sell yourself. Gives you class.’

Benny Bigg thought it over. If captain would be good and major better, then colonel would be still better. So he became Colonel Benjamin Bigg, White Hunter.

His advertisement in Outdoor Life brought a radiogram from a wealthy New Yorker: ‘State price for a thirty-day safari.’ He must have been wealthy, since he did not back down when Bigg replied with a quotation of seven thousand dollars for his expert services for one month.

Bigg’s offer was accepted. Bigg instructed his client to meet him in Nairobi, where most safaris are outfitted,

The client, Hiram Bullwinkle, together with his wife, arrived at the time set. In the lounge of the Norfolk Hotel they met the famous hunter to whose skill and daring they were going to trust their lives for the coming month.

Colonel Bigg played his part to the limit. He casually referred to his exploits during the war (he didn’t say which war) and tossed off the names of some of his former clients, such as the Archduke of Austria and the King of Norway. Mrs Bullwinkle was entranced with this romantic hero of war and wilderness. Mr Bullwinkle was impressed, but a little uneasy. Somehow this professional hunter seemed a little too good.

Bigg went to an outfitting firm which did the things he didn’t know how to do for himself. They got for him the necessary game licences, experienced African gun-bearers and trackers, food supplies for thirty days, tents, cots, and folding bath-tubs, jeeps and Land-Rover.

So the safari took off, the clients guided by the ‘colonel’, the ‘colonel’ guided by his Africans.

For the first week everything went fairly well. Mr Bullwinkle bagged an elephant. His own bullet

merely wounded the beast, but the gallant White Hunter and three black gun-bearers all fired at once and the elephant dropped dead.

It was odd that a monkey in a tree fell dead at the same moment. Colonel Bigg explained that one of his gun-bearers was not a very good shot. But Mr Bullwinkle remembered that the White Hunter's gun had most curiously wobbled about and at the moment of firing seemed to be pointed rather above the elephant's back and directly towards that monkey.

A waterbuck, a wildebeest, and a zebra were added to the bag, but each time there seemed some doubt about the White Hunter's part in the act. Mr Bullwinkle, who had some knowledge of men, began to suspect that his White Hunter was a fraud.

Then came the day of the lion. Mrs Bullwinkle ventured a hundred feet from camp to get a shot at a Tommy gazelle. She carried a .275 Rigby, which was just right for a gazelle but not for big game. She was not afraid, for her White Hunter was beside her and he carried a -470 Nitro Express, which was tough enough to tackle anything alive.

What should pop out of the elephant grass but a huge male lion! He gazed for a moment at the two advancing hunters; then, since he was not looking for trouble, he turned to go. Mrs Bullwinkle knew her gun was not built to shoot lion.

'Get him!' she whispered. Colonel Bigg glanced around. His gun-bearers were not close enough to help him this time. Anyhow, there was nothing to fear. The lion must be a coward. He was running away. What a feather it would be in the colonel's cap if he could bag this lion! Bigg raised his heavy gun and fired.

What happened then scared him out of his wits. The lion, wounded just enough to become angry, wheeled about with a savage growl and came straight for his tormentor.

Colonel Bigg dropped his gun and ran for his life. Mrs Bullwinkle stood her ground and fired. With a final leap the big cat was upon her, teeth and claws tearing into her flesh. She heard another explosion then knew nothing more.

She woke to find herself on her cot in the tent. The senior gun-bearer had just finished treating and bandaging her wounds.

'What happened?' she said.

'This man got in a shot just in time,' said her husband. 'The lion is dead.'

'Where is Colonel Bigg?'

'Gone. I sent him packing. I told him if I ever see him again I'll kill him!'

'But we can't get back to Nairobi without him.'

'Nonsense. Our Africans will get us back. They've been the brains of this trip all along. Do you realize you'd be dead now if it hadn't been for this gun-bearer? Bigg ran like a scared rabbit and left you to the lion. White Hunter indeed! He's a fake and we're lucky to be rid of him.'

So Colonel Bigg wandered for three days and nights before the smell of eggs and bacon led him to the Hunt camp.

He did not arrive unobserved. Roger saw him stop to comb his hair, set his hat at a rakish angle, and take on the air of a big White Hunter. Roger also saw the crouching cat on the branch. And the stranger saw Roger.

‘My boy,’ he called. ‘I want to see your master.’

Roger didn’t like to be called ‘my boy’ and he didn’t care for that word ‘master’. With mischief brewing in that innocent-looking head of his, he came forward and stopped just short of the half-hidden leopard. To reach him the stranger would have to pass under the branch.

‘Good morning, sir,’ Roger said politely. ‘What name shall I give my - master?’

The stranger drew himself up to his full height. ‘Colonel Benjamin Bigg, professional hunter.’

‘Who is it, Roger?’ came the voice of John Hunt.

‘A very important person, Dad. You’d better come.’

Hunt joined his son, and would have gone on directly beneath the branch to shake hands with the visitor if Roger had not stopped him with a hand on his arm. The newcomer repeated his name and rank.

Hunt thought he knew all the White Hunters, but he had never heard of this one. But he only said:

‘You are welcome. What brings you out so early in the morning? Is your camp near by?’

‘It is not, sir. I was guiding an American fool and his wife, who is a bigger fool. I rescued them repeatedly when their own folly led them into danger. They would not obey my instructions. Therefore I cancelled my contract and sent them back to Nairobi.’

‘And you?’ Hunt said. ‘You struck out alone? No car, no gun-boys, no supplies?’

‘Think nothing of it,’ replied Bigg loftily. ‘I know this country like the palm of my hand. And so long as I have this’ - he tapped his rifle - ‘I won’t go hungry. Plenty of game about, and I’m not a bad shot.’

‘Then I suppose you’ve already had your breakfast?’

Bigg looked beyond Hunt to the fire and the breakfast table, and his mouth watered.

‘Well, well, I’ll sit with you if you like, but I won’t promise to eat anything. I’m pretty full.’ He patted his stomach. ‘Nothing like a buffalo steak grilled over an open fire.’

‘So you killed a buffalo this morning? Pretty tough customer for one man to tackle.’

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