

## Chihatchi

*Opening the door for some casual reason and finding an unannounced stranger standing three feet away not having yet rung or knocked is disconcerting enough to raise eyebrows. When the stranger is a fully grown lioness with two sisters in close attendance, reactions are more positive. Fortunately, hers and mine were similar. She said, 'Bwoff' in a startlingly deep voice and leapt backwards. I did the same, with the difference that instead of a comment I slammed the door. If she had jumped towards, instead of away from me, I would have had no chance to grab the rifle even though it was to hand.*

*My visitors were not entirely unexpected, albeit not at such close range. A couple of days previously one of my cows had been taken and the remains indicated the involvement of more than one lion. Alone on the farm, I lived and slept in a small outhouse while building a dwelling house. Almost on the point of turning in for the night, my little terrier bitch pricked up her ears, looked at the door and growled. I had a powerful torch in one hand and needing the other to open the door, propped the rifle against the wall by the doorframe, which is why it was not in my hand during that critical second. More heart-thumping seconds passed without any scrabbling at the door. After a moment I found enough courage to open it, with a view to shooting one or more of the predators eating at my expense, but they had gone, which suggests that curiosity was probably their only motive for having approached so close.*

*Later I was to learn that the door was the wrong place on which to focus. If they had been determined to get at me they would have come through the thatched roof, a lion's usual route for breaking and entering. Months would pass before I shot my first one, caught red-handed inside the cattle kraal. I was nineteen, and these were the first lions I had ever seen. Even those one might see in a zoo, circus, and certainly the wild, are normally*

*further than three feet away, a distance usually associated with serious trouble. I was in Zambia's Northern Province on a steep learning curve, involving cattle farming (lion control included), butchering, building a house and coping with the first horse I had ever met - an animal with a mind of his own and a strong disinclination to be caught even when saddled. It was a long way from the Yorkshire I had left in an ex-army lorry in 1946 at the age of thirteen, intended destination South Africa. Metaphorically, it was even further from the life I would probably have led had I remained in Britain. There would be more life-style changes over the next half-century*

Shortly after I arrived in Abercorn a rugby match was arranged between the Red Locust personnel and the rest of the town, whose team ranged in age from me as the youngest, to men in their fifties. Most of our team hadn't played since they left school. Some had taken little exercise for years, with figures reflecting an affluent life-style. Our opponents were almost all university students from a country where obsession with rugby equals that of the British with soccer. I can't remember if our side scored at all; if so it could only have been because our opponents good naturedly conspired to allow us to do so.

Among the catalogue of colourful characters I must mention one who managed to delay a scheduled flight take-off at Abercorn's small airport. Pekinese dogs tend to be exophthalmic, so their eyes are vulnerable. This one, having either lost or damaged an eye, was wearing an eye patch. He had also sustained an injury to a front leg which was in a sling. The aircraft clearly was something dangerous from which everyone had to be protected. The DC3 ready to go, its take-off path was blocked by this tiny creature with an eye patch and arm in a sling, hurling defiance!

I had a donkey stallion and two or three mares. Jack Rogers had a donkey, also a stallion but docile enough to be ridden by his small son. On two occasions however it crossed the Saisi to challenge my stallion to combat. Maybe he had smelt that one of the mares was in season. Donkeys do not have a glamorous image, but when donkey stallions fight, docility is suspended and the image is at least no longer a boring one.

The fights were spectacular. The combatants were separated with difficulty and at some risk to one's person. An improvised halter would be fashioned for the Rogers donkey. One of my men would take it, braying its disappointment, back home, where it would be confined to quarters for a few days. In fact, a donkey stallion protecting his family of mares and foals is said to be courageous enough to charge a lion in a desperate attempt to scare it away from them. A far cry from the placid image usually associated with this underestimated little warrior

On the new farm, Isia, the dozen or so temporary grass huts of my workers were a little apart from my own. One Sunday, a day on which we didn't work, I was writing a letter when a pandemonium of excitement and alarm erupted from the workers' double line of huts. Some urgency seemed to be called for. Having grabbed my rifle I was presented with an astonishing tableau. A reedbuck ram, a beautiful antelope about the size of a red deer hind was in full flight, heading straight towards me. As I appeared out of my hut he swerved, passing me with no more than ten feet between us. The workers' camp was a spectacular medley of men, shrieking women, four or five African wild dogs, one or two domestic ones, squawking chickens, terrified children and a couple of toddlers who thought the whole thing was great fun. Everything seemed to be in fast-forward motion. To try a shot was out of the question;

people were everywhere in the line of fire. The wild dogs, who seemed to be as confused as the rest of us eventually took off in the direction from which they had come, so the reedbuck's tactic paid off; he got clean away.

I use the word 'tactic' deliberately. The African Wild dog is a highly successful predator, but some of its prey seem to have developed desperate survival strategies when under attack by a pack. A wildebeest will stick his rear end into a thorn bush to prevent attack from behind. A waterbuck will go into water deep enough to force the dogs to swim to him, and if they do, some of them will end up on his horns. I have read that a kangaroo being chased by dogs or dingos will go into a billabong to chest height and drown them. And a reedbuck will do as the one of my Sunday afternoon experience did so successfully; run straight through a human habitation in the hope of creating sufficient confusion to facilitate an escape. This is not conjecture; all of these actions have been noted, recounted and written about. Nelson told me about a reedbuck who had run through an established village while being chased by dogs, running in its confusion into an empty house, which he recounted as a lucky windfall. Not so lucky for the dogs, and less so for the buck which ended up in the meat-hungry villagers' cooking pots.

On horseback however I was conscious of being on a piece of 'live bait' as it were. If one were to be pulled off a horse by a lion a rifle would be too cumbersome to be any use and an ordinary pistol inadequate. I had a 12-bore shotgun with one barrel damaged. I cut both barrels off short, fashioned a pistol

grip and carried it in a shoulder holster. It could be used one-handed and would have blown a hole right through a lion at physical contact range had I ever had occasion to use it. Much more effective than a knife! However, a sawn-off shotgun is an illegal weapon, so when I finally left the area I dropped it down a long-drop loo.

At one time I had a VW Combi. This was quite a popular family vehicle at the time; in Abercorn there were two or three of them, all of the same blue colour. One day I called in at the Abercorn Arms for a beer or two then left to go home to the ranch, twenty-five miles away. About ten miles down the road I suddenly noticed a doll on the passenger seat. There were curtains in the windows. Dolls and curtains didn't feature in my bachelor life-style. I had taken the wrong vehicle. So I turned round and drove back to the pub, hoping the owner hadn't reported his car as having been stolen. I needn't have worried, he was still firmly attached to his bar stool and wasn't aware of my appropriation of his decorously appointed family transport. I doubt if any car was ever locked in Abercorn.

In one year which was abnormally wet, streams which would usually be only a foot or so deep, became torrents. To avoid having my saddles saturated I took to riding bare-back wearing only a pair of shorts, a swimming costume or even a towel, which was pleasant in so warm a climate. I became so used to this that even in the dry season, if going to the house to get a saddle after having caught my horse involved more than a couple of hundred yards I would just hop on bareback and set off, sometimes for miles. Riding bare-back one cannot rise to the trot, so I trained my horses to a comfortable easy canter.

Another advantage to riding bareback I discovered is the reduced incidence of saddle and/or girth sores, never even

hinted at in novels or films and rarely a problem in recreational riding. But it can be a major one in horses being ridden for long hours.

Medical opinion on the treatment of snakebite seemed to change as frequently as that of the treatment for malaria. Doctors came and went, but as there was never more than one at a time we had only one opinion, so the treatment reflected each doctor's personal inclination on both of these controversial subjects rather than that of the medical profession.

One of the doctors favoured a method of treatment for snakebite featuring the injection of 2cc of a 5% solution of Magnesium Sulphate, the more commonly named 'Epsom Salts', in four places around the bite. It was a comparatively new concept. - - -  
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One night, one of John's workers was bitten by a snake, fortunately not a mamba. John, who had not heard of this innovative treatment drove the man with some urgency to the well equipped African hospital, to be startled by the African orderly's assurance,

'We shall give him Epsom Salts'.

John rang the nurse at her flat.

'Your bloody orderly wants to give my worker Epsom Salts for snake-bite!'

'Aye, that's what we give them,' came the reply in the nurse's Yorkshire accent.

The Triton, a fifty-four foot long trimaran with massive outriggers on both sides was not the easiest thing to move. It had, of course been built on the trailer which was to carry it, but getting it from the garage premises in Abercorn to Mpulungu some twenty-eight miles by dirt road involving a descent of nine hundred metres called for some advance planning. A police escort was provided to handle any approaching traffic as the assembly required the full width of the road. A whole day was

allocated to getting it to the lakeshore for the launch the following morning. Two tractors were used, one to tow and another behind to provide additional braking if necessary. Maximum speed; a walking pace.

It became a spectator event attended by a large part of Abercorn's white population. On arrival at Mpulungu a celebratory impromptu party got under way. Clearly this had been anticipated by somebody, because copious quantities of booze came to light. Mpulungu enjoys a warm tropical climate, so eventually people just curled up wherever they could find, trying to get a little sleep before daylight. The exception to this was the chief of police who roistered heroically throughout the night, keeping those nearest to him unavoidably awake. Maddy and I were able to nap on a pile of fish netting on the Venus.

Mpulungu's pier was always at the same level as the decks of the Liemba. (There is no tide in an inland sea). When she was moored alongside the quay large fenders were put out between the hull of the vessel and the wall leaving a gap that was bridged by a short companionway. The Liemba's arrival was an occasion. Europeans would come down from Abercorn for a meal on board and a few drinks. Local Africans also came aboard to party more enthusiastically. On one such night a small African child fell into the gap to the water, some three or four metres below. Alerted by the mother's demented screaming, four or five of the African seamen threw off their light clothing and were into the water naked within seconds. They kept on diving to the bottom, where there would have been no visibility at all even had it been daytime, so all they could do was grope blindly. Eventually one of them came up with the pathetic small body. An ex-nurse who happened to be there tried an artificial respiration procedure but it was too late, the child had drowned.

Columns of marching Red Ants were best avoided. - - - -

The attractive, albeit prim young Scottish married lady working for me in the butchery at the time told me that she had once been their victim at a picnic spot on the banks of the Kafue river, a place popular at weekends with Lusaka people. She had not hesitated to strip naked in full view, remedial action having very suddenly become a more urgent priority than her ingrained Scottish modesty. This imperative reaction is usual. They seem to be able to get into to one's clothing unobtrusively until in numerical strength and then by some sort of telepathy all attack at the same time.

An indication of the featureless nature of the bush can be illustrated by the experience of one of my friends. Driving from Abercorn to Kasama in the rainy season he lost control of his car, which performed some spectacular gyrations but remained on the road, still upright. At that time there were no telephone posts on the roadside. It was a windless day, the sun obscured by cloud. A disoriented Alastair drove seventeen miles back towards Abercorn before realizing he was going the wrong way.

My cook could produce passable meals, but as a bachelor, if I had visitors, I often made ice-cream, the basic ingredient of fresh cream being available from my own cows. Making this one day I found the vanilla essence to be finished. I had been given, or had maybe won on a raffle, some liqueur. I forget which kind, but as an alternative to vanilla essence it proved to be excellent. The day came when this too ran out, so I used brandy instead. Inevitably, the brandy component gradually became so prominent as to inhibit the freezing process, however this dessert was very popular with my occasional guest.

Maddy's childhood in what was at the time India, later to become Pakistan, involved ponies and frequent riding. She had had little opportunity to ride in Britain, but still rode well. On one of her visits to the farm before we were married, she came



without slacks. Stirrup leathers are hell on bare legs not hardened in to them so I suggested that we ride bareback, knowing that my horse Calahan's short comfortable canter would not present any problems to a rider of her ability. She kicked off her flip-flops that would probably have fallen off anyway, and rode barefoot.

What I had not taken into account was the tenderness of the bum of someone not riding as frequently as I did. It was a disaster. Riding in only a cotton dress, the only thing between Maddy and Calahan was her thin panties, poor protection against his bristly hide and slightly raised spine. Her skin started to be chafed, but being barefoot, there was no option to walk back to the house.

The chafing had resulted in a sore on each cheek of her bum. It's a wonder that the girl eventually married me, after my having inflicted this outrage on her person.

I was usually up and about much earlier than Maddy. One morning I shot a leopard which had been treed by the dogs. It was an exceptionally large specimen, strong enough to have killed a yearling heifer the previous night. When with the help of a couple of my African boys I had draped it across my horse behind the saddle, its tail and its front paws were near the ground on each side. I rode back to the house to show off to my girl-friend calling to her from outside our bedroom window, but the spectacle of me on horseback with a large leopard didn't seem to impress her. She went back to bed.

I wanted to take Maddy to Mbeya to meet some of my friends there and enjoy the change of scenery which had attracted me years earlier. Paul's carrycot was much too large for his tiny body; he rattled around in it on our rough roads, so we took him in a shoe box.

My friends Robert and Margaret Rothbletz were proprietors of the garage in Mbeya. Robert was originally from Alsace; Margaret born in Tanganyika of a German family. She was a very keen angler in the trout streams of the Mporoto hills to the South-East of Mbeya, where the angling club had a hut, the sort of thing one would call a 'bothy' in Scotland, where anglers could spend a night or two. It was equipped with basic necessities including a galvanized steel hip bath with handles. One had it filled with water from the adjacent trout stream, heating the water on the open fire. There were crude cooking facilities.

Margaret persuaded us to go there. She lent us her fly-fishing rod, a selection of flies and gave us advice on which part of the river to try. I had never set eyes on a fly rod in my life, but the concept was appealing.

Fortunately, we had some warm clothing with us. We needed it. Maddy in particular needed it, because she fell into the icy stream while getting water for Paul's bath. This happened while I was out with the African guide trying to catch a rainbow trout and master the unfamiliar fly-casting skill. Instead of improving, my poor casting seemed to be getting worse. The reason became apparent. Each time the wet line passed through the rings of the rod, a little ice formed inside the ring, gradually reducing its effective inside diameter. As I was wondering how to deal with this, the line froze to the rings needing a jerk to free it. The place is closer to the equator than to the tropic of Capricorn, but the altitude is over 2500 metres. I didn't catch any fish, but the mountainous and green terrain was a stimulating change from our Northern Rhodesian bush. It was an enjoyable couple of days.

On the way back to the ranch in Northern Rhodesia again, an African pedestrian was signaling rather urgently for a lift. It was already dark and we were in lion country, so I stopped, putting him into the back of our closed VW Transporter van. The only

window was in the back door. We would have been raising the usual cloud of dust, so how he could possibly have known that we had arrived at his village is a mystery, nevertheless he banged on the bulkhead behind us at the right spot. When I opened the door he ran straight out of the van to the little collection of huts without the usual word of thanks, which was unusual. I was just about to drive off when he re-appeared with a chicken for us. He must have grabbed the first one which came to hand. When we arrived home at the ranch, we found our reward had laid an egg in the back of the van.

