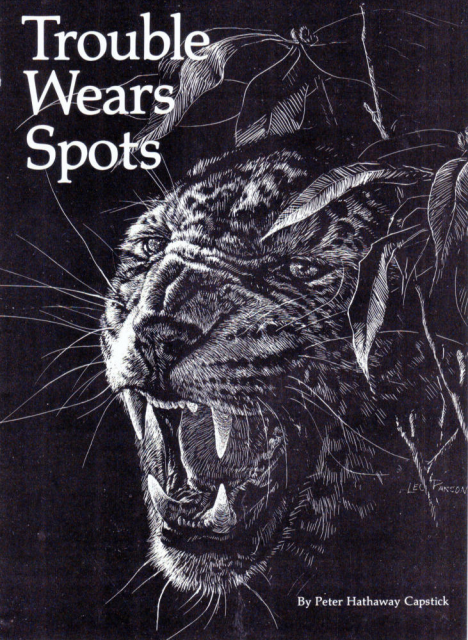


Trouble Wears Spots



By Peter Hathaway Capstick



Photos by Lawrence Lee Bess III

The Crippled Leopard Had Already Shredded Two Persons, And Now It Would Have A Third Chance.

He was still alive when the men reached my little camp on the Mnyamadzi River, although I'm sure I don't know why. It was *emeni*, midday, in Zambia's dry season, when everything was sensibly quiet in the heat including me, propped in the cool shade of the sausage tree grove with a sweating Lion Lager in my grubby fist. Things had been thankfully slow in the mayhem department the last few days, and my game-control duties of shooting raiding elephant or chasing poachers had been light. But there was always the paperwork in quintuplicate, and I had spent the past three days filling in "kill" forms and making the usual inventory of ivory, confiscated poached trophies and such ready for the official vehicle that would be by any time to pick them up. The three scouts under my command were afield on duty with their bicycles and not due back until the day after tomorrow, leaving in camp only myself, old Silent and a kitchen *toto* to fetch water and wood.

Silent saw them first. They were still 500 yards away, walking across a flat, two Awiza tribesmen carrying a blanket-wrapped form slung from a pole between them. It didn't take a Sherlock Holmes to figure out what would be in that dirty, torn blanket, either. It looked

like the vacation was over. When they laid it down and unwrapped the tattered edges, even I, who can happily eat his lunch seated on the rapidly rotting carcass of a dead elephant, had to force down a gag. The poor bugger looked like he'd spent a weekend in a Waring blender set at "cole slaw." Except for the burning, unblinking eyes which stared at me, I would have thought the best medicine for him was a shovel. But, he was not only alive, he talked!

The bush African seems to defy most of the rules of medicine. You can convince him that he's been hexed, and he'll lie down and die on you in about four days. Yet, I've seen him ripped from crotch to clavicle by rhino horn and double-tusked through the intestines by elephant; burned, infected and shredded by lion, and, within a few weeks he's back on his feet again, scarred but healthy despite wounds that would have given a Spanish Inquisitor the queasies. So it seemed to be with this one.

As it turned out, despite the fact that quite a lot of his face was hanging free from its moorings, he looked vaguely familiar. When he spoke, I realized that I knew him from the village as he called me by my African name, Nyaluhwe. *Nyaluhwe* means leopard in Chenyanja which seemed to throw a macabre

humor over the situation. It developed that it had been my namesake that had re-platted the man, whose name was Chisi. Silent brought the big medicine kit and had the kitchen lad set water to boiling. We lifted him to the makeshift dining table and, as I listened to him tell his tale, did what I could to reassemble the jigsaw puzzle of torn flesh.

It was about an hour after dawn, the sun still low behind the yellow thorn trees when Chisi had walked out from the village with his son, a six-year-old named Ntani, to check his *kwali* or partridge snares. Although I, of course, did not permit the setting of wire snares for game in my area and treated offenders firmly in the extreme, I didn't see much harm in the old frankolin or guinea fowl being snared for the family pot provided only grass cord or light bark fiber was used. At the edge of a grassy *vlei*, dead in the winter dryness, they entered the cover with Chisi leading and carrying his spear. The boy followed close behind.

I poured disinfectant into one fang hole in his arm and watched it run out another as he went on, his voice oddly calm and clear despite the obvious pain he must have been in since the shock wore off. At the third snare they visited, a cock

continued on p. 71

Trouble Wears Spots

continued from p. 23

guinea fowl was struggling mightily, breaking the anchor line just as the pair came up and dashing off still half-tied into the bush. Chisi watched, amused, as the boy chased it through the cover, which was very thick. Then came a shriek cut short, a thrashing, then silence. As quickly as he could run, Chisi bulled through the grass, his spear drawn back for a throw. As he pounded along, he almost ran over the grisly scene, a big, male leopard standing over his son, whose neck was still in the cat's jaws. So fast it was a blur, the leopard dropped the child and instantly sprang at Chisi, who managed to thrust at it with the spear blade, missing the chest but cutting deeply into the stomach.

The leopard's lightning charge knocked Chisi down backwards as the cat fastened long teeth in his arm. The deadly hind legs windmilled, seeking and finding his belly and thighs, flashing claws

odd loops of Chisi's guts back into his lower chest and taping on a hopefully sterile, wet compression pack when he finished his story. He had lain for some time, stunned, staring at the lifeless corpse of his son a few feet away. Already, the flies were gathering. Fortunately, the two men who had carried Chisi here had noticed the vulture activity and gone to investigate, finding him and the boy. They had rigged the *machilla* with the blanket and stopped by the village on their way to send a party for Ntani's body.

It was the middle of the afternoon before I had done what I could with Chisi, closing the worst tears with butterfly tape sutures rather than sewing him up in case of almost sure infection later. With a butt full of penicillin and a dreamy smile on his face from the injection of morphine, he calmly watched me radio for a Game Department car to pick him up and take him to a small dispensary about 50 miles away which had an Indian doctor. I would have taken him myself, but I

it's my personal belief, based upon experiences I would much rather not have had, that there is no circumstance so potentially lethal in taking any of the Big Five as following up a wounded but still active leopard. The big boys — elephant, rhino and buff, are large enough usually to see them in time to kill or turn a charge. Even the lion, although he's more likely to kill you if he can actually close, will betray a charge with a growl or roar, giving you some idea where he's coming from. Not the leopard. He never gives you an edge, saving that rush or spring for such close quarters that he's sure he'll nail you or he won't come. With the most perfect camouflage in nature, he's invisible until he turns into a golden-dappled streak of purest malevolence, biting and clawing with such speed that cases have been recorded in which a wounded leopard has mauled as many as seven armed men in a single rush and melted back into the grass before anybody could do anything but bleed.

Once, in Botswana, I tried to force a wounded leopard out of a quite small clump of grassy bush by raking it with #6 shotgun pellets. A whole box of shells was used in this case. There was never a sound or movement although I knew I must be hitting the gut-shot cat with some of the pellets. Finally, I just had to conclude that it had died of its wounds. But, I'd been around long enough trying to keep my lovely complexion free of those annoying keloid scars ever to presume anything about leopards. I was as cute entering that grass as a guy on his way to defuse a cobalt bomb. Just as well. Trick or treat. I killed him with a lucky shot at six feet from the hip with a 12-gauge mashie which didn't do much for his profile. When we unzipped the big tom, we found that he'd collected 77 of those probing pellets from roughly 40 yards without a twitch or whimper. My safari client had the ill grace to observe that I had ruined the face of his trophy by shooting it in the chops with a load of buckshot. This being a family magazine, I don't believe I'll repeat my reply.

Silent and I, guided by the two Awizas, whose names I don't recall,



Capstick considers a wounded leopard potentially more lethal than going after a wounded lion, rhino, elephant or buffalo. Leopards never betray a charge by growling or roaring and are so well camouflaged they are almost invisible in heavy cover.

shredding meat to bone. A forepaw hooked and held for a moment in the flesh of the right side of his face, pulling the tissue into red ribbons as the claws tore free.

I had just finished stuffing the

had business back in that high grass.

Of the three things I most distinctly dislike doing, digging wounded leopards out of thick bush ranks unquestionably first. In fact,



arrived at the *vlei* at half-past four in the afternoon, having left Chisi in the care of the kitchen helper until the Land Rover arrived. I'd done all I could and now the most important matter was to settle accounts with the *nyalabier* before somebody inadvertently stumbled into him or he started to develop the capitalistic tendencies of free enterprise. Leopard man-eaters are more rare than lions or crocs, although they often are killers of opportunity, taking a child or woman just as they would any other primate such as a baboon or monkey. Still, from Chisi's account, I think that the leopard merely happened to be in the grass and heard the excited cries of the guinea fowl. As it raced on a collision course with Ntani to catch the bird, the cat probably by reflex grabbed the child as the better meal. Of course, this was mere theory, but as there had been no reports of man-eating leopards in this district for more than a year, I guesstimated this was the case. No matter. The cat was wounded and would still chew and claw the Tax Reform Act out of anybody who crossed it and might even turn full man-eater if incapacitated and unable to take its normal smaller prey. Among other things, that's what I got paid to prevent. Helluva way to get rich.

I killed the hunting car's engine 200 yards from the place indicated by the two men and stepped out, Silent hopping out of the rear with my leopard bag. That there may be no speculation, I am the worst sort of sissy, bearing an ingrained

aversion to having my throat torn out, my face pulled off or my insides hooked outside by wounded leopards. Although it hasn't happened yet, I will probably get the Big Surprise one of these fine days and, so, have developed my own program of preventive medicine. It's contained in a shoulder bag and includes a heavy leather jacket with strips of tough vinyl floor covering riveted to it for armor, and an old U.S. Marine leather neckguard to which there are riveted strips of sheet steel. Included also is the finest private collection of tourniquets, buckle straps and assorted disinfectants in all of central Africa. There's also tape by the mile, bandages enough for the Light Brigade, a six-cell flashlight, 15 rounds each of British SSG buckshot and Brenneke rifled slugs as well as sufficient morphine styrettes that if I do get a proper peeling I won't give a damn.

Silent checks out the bag's contents, and you shrug into the jacket, finally lacing up the neck protector. No need for the old .375 H&H; this will be a very personal affair. The Winchester Model 12 slides, silver-worn and sharp with the odor of WD-40, from the soft case. You thumb six rounds into the unplugged magazine, jack one into the chamber and top off the cargo with a seventh in the magazine. You try not to notice the deep claw marks on the pump's forestock which tends to bring up disconcerting memories of this sort of situation. Unable to think of even the most improbable excuse to stay around the car pattering with your gear, you reluctantly head for the *vlei* and all that bloody grass feeling much like a gladiator waiting for the main gate to the arena to open. You have decided not to take Silent (who is now pouting) because it's just too thick, and you may have to snapshot in any direction in a fraction of a second. He would not look very well after a charge of buckshot from a couple of feet and, anyway, good gunbearers are getting hard to find.

The first 50 yards take a full half-hour. The gun is held well back on the hip to prevent the leopard from getting between you and the muzzle. The worn walnut is slippery with sweat. Each step is taken with infinite slowness on the outside

edges of the feet. Visibility is down to eight or 10 feet, so there's no point in looking for the leopard itself. Instead, you watch for the movement of grass it will be forced to make when it charges. Oh, he'll charge alright, because he's almost certainly still here, lying up and licking his wounds. The trail of Chisi and his son blends with the in-and-out bloodstained route of the other men and the party recovering the child's body until you finally reach the unmistakable place of death. There are large gouts of arterial blood which means Ntani bled to death and did not die of a broken neck. A few feet away there is another patch of torn and red-smearred ground where Chisi was mauled. From the spoor leading away into the grass, it would seem that he may have "washed his spear" well in the leopard, hopefully well enough that he'll be nice and dead, although you somehow doubt it. Well, at least you have something going for you with a blood trail to follow and enough time gone by for the cat's wounds to slow it down. Whoa. Wait a minute. You know better than that. Expect the worst and there'll be no big surprises.

The sun is starting to slip away by the time you find the soggy place in the grass 30 yards from the mauling where the leopard stopped to lie up for a while. Not good. He's moved and you sure don't need shadows on top of everything else. But he's still trickling a thin, crimson spoor on the stalks, so you had better get in gear before you lose the light.

Step. Turn completely around. Listen. Listen hard for the tiniest swish of grass. You've got to know where he's coming from before you can put up that defensive thunderstorm of lead. Twenty more yards. And then you know.

Everything has slowed down except your heart. As if by hypnosis, your eyes are drawn to the grass at your right front. Was there a sound so faint you didn't consciously register it? Hard as you stare, nothing of the leopard is to be seen. But, you're somehow positive he's there, off to the right of the blood spoor, waiting for you on his own track. You can actually feel his eyes through the stems and stalks.

Slowly, the shotgun swivels to cover the spot, which looks exactly like every other khaki clump of growth. Sweat is pouring down your face despite the fact that you feel oddly cool. What next?

You don't have to decide. He does. Like an uncoiling steel spring, he's in the air, launched directly at your face, his mask a twisted, befanged horror framed between extended, inward-turned paws, studded with long, hooked, white claws. Despite his speed, you somehow have time to notice every detail of his awful, sinuous, lithe beauty — even the swollen tick on the side of his face. Then the Winchester fires — a short, hard bark — and his left front paw is disintegrating, shredded as the solid charge of shot explodes it on the way to his neck and head. With the trigger still held back, you instantly work the pump. The second swarm of buckshot pours into him as the firing pin slams the primer on the return stroke. A hole the size of your clenched fist appears just where his throat meets his upper chest, visibly slowing him in flight with the terrible impact of the charge. He turns in the air as if somersaulting to crash on his back, as limp as a plastic bag of sausage meat, landing a yard short of your feet with a soggy thump. Without any hesitation, you kill him again. It's a shame to blow such a hole in that beautiful amber and anthracite skin, but you know his will be more easily repaired than your own. Lordie, but a cigarette will taste good with a long swig from the water bag.

You give a sharp whistle and hear Silent fire up the old hunting car as you slip out of the armored jacket and untie the neck protector. In a few minutes, guided by your whistles, the grass is folding down and the bonnet of the Rover pokes its way into view with the snout of a prehistoric, metal hippo. You go through the usual, highly-flattering version of what happened for his sake, so he may enjoy the status of having a Bwana worth lying about. The leopard is easily loaded on an old piece of canvas and swung over the edge of the pick-up tailgate when you happen to notice that your bush shorts are really quite soggy. Must have spilled some water from the jaw-sack. Yeah. ■