

The Witches'



The Hyena's Mystic Association With Death May Be No Laughing Matter.

By Peter Hathaway Capstick

Had the fire been younger, the bluish violet eyes might have been visible, reflecting the glow of resinous mopane logs that were now dull and unattended since the last of the *tribwala* beer was gone from the containers of dried gourds. The men slept easily in the warmth of blackness that is the velvet shroud of central African night, their breathing slower and deeper to the pricked-up ears so few yards away. As the thick, gray brew continued to ferment in the tribesmen's stomachs, they slipped farther and farther into unconsciousness. That would be almost a blessing to the youngest one, passed out at the very perimeter of the dying light.

The eyes were still. Unblinking. It was now too dark to see the long drip of saliva

fall soundlessly from the massive jaws and the slight shifting of the seemingly crippled hind legs. With a studied stealth, the great, muscular head turned to survey the village, empty, lifeless, dead in the depths of sleep. Satisfied, the animal moved closer a single step, stopped and again looked completely around him. The smell of the man-place brought a pulsing throb of hunger scampering through his stomach. It detected the slightly rotten aroma of fire-dried venison made without the benefit of salt, the wood smoke and the acrid odor of the hairless man-things mixed with the stranger smell of black shag tobacco and *dugga*, native hashish. They were certainly odd, these creatures with only a short thatch of fur on their heads. But, food was food and there had

been no recent lion kill so could find before the vultures and jackals had found it first. He had learned several times before that these strange animals were excellent eating, provided he wasn't too finicky.

The small slice of silver moon slid silently under a scant scrap of cloud, and the lumpy figures of the sleepers were immersed in even deeper shadow. Now, a ripple of shifting sinews and solid muscle played under the matted pelt as a foreleg was lifted and carefully placed down, then the next. The stalk was slow, calculated, yet as sinister as the flashing lunge of a crocodile as the animal came within reach of the nearest man. A waft of dark motion and a gleam of tremendous fangs blended into a shadowy blur and then he was

Warrior



gone, hunching back into the night with the bloody tatters of the night's labor. I don't think you would like my closer description.

If you have spent even a short time in the real Africa, he's an old pale sunchow more than an acquaintance, although you would not be inclined to lend him money. He's the spirit personified of the Great, Black Continent, her voice, her personality and her absolute finality. Many do not understand why I and other hunters hold him in such regard despite his reputation in children's books and pulp fiction. He's supposed to be smelly, dirty, thoroughly nasty, cowardly and shiffter than a punt return specialist. That depends on your viewpoint and the circumstances under which you observe him. He's dirty if he's

been rolling in dust-eating dust. He's smelly if he just finished finding his way out of the middle of a charmingly ripe elephant carcass. Yet, to imply that he has the human characteristics of nastiness and cowardice is ridiculous. He is no more nor less than one of the world's most efficient food processors and if that happens to include human beings dead or alive or portions thereof, don't take it personally. He's the spotted hyena, quite probably one of the most intelligent and fascinating meat-eaters in business.

There are two sounds that mean Africa to me; the sundown cooing gargle of roosting doves and the vocal smorgasbord of the hyena. Sure, lions are wonderful to hear as they grunt, grumble, roar and rumble through the blackness. So is the

postnasal honk of the hippo and the burbling blast of old pumpkins. But in comparison to the repertoire of the hyena, any of these are like matching a penny whistle with a pipe organ. Africa is that late campfire and soft air, the low, musical mutter of Kiswahili, Fanagalo or Sendebele from the native quarters, the tang of a no-ice scotch and the hyenas. Other animals call. Hyenas tell you something if you listen. They speak of the fellowship of the hunt with their long, whooping assembly notes that rise and fall, quavering on the light *moya go bwenku*, the night wind which is the sleeping breath of *Nkulunkulu*, the Great Lord. As the pack gathers and begins to hunt, the wild music grows into a weird cadence with the

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haunting quality of the ghostly hunting horns of medieval Europe, announcing that a victim has been chosen. And the kill. No man can describe the sound of 20 hyenas dragging down their prey — which may even be a lion if they're hungry enough or he's old enough — and the primal cacophony of snorts, cackles, giggles, whoops and shrieks that declare to the blackness that there has been no alteration in the old ashes to ashes routine.

One of the greatest misconceptions about *Fisi*, *Pirri* or *Mpsisi* or whatever you'd prefer to call him in dialect, is that he is strictly a scavenger. That unfortunate chap who had been overserved back at the campfire might take rightful exception to such an observation considering that he has no meat on the left side of his face from the point where his nose used to be. Actually, he was lucky it was only his face. Of course hyenas will eat the kills of other predators just as you would pick up a \$100 bill blowing along the sidewalk. That's just common sense. What has only fairly recently been realized is that in most parts of Africa (the rarer striped hyena is also found in Asia and has developed a firm reputation as a man-eater there) hyenas either make the majority of their own kills or, in fact, take away the prey of bigger and less efficient predators. In some locations, lions actually live off the leavings of hyena packs, which must be mighty slim pickings.

I have written in a recent book, *DEATH IN THE LONG GRASS* (which by the strangest quirk of chance happens to be available through the NRA Book Service at a juicy discount to members) of some biologists' findings, which do not permit detailed repetition here. In short, they say that one South African expert reported that of more than a thousand hyenas observed feeding, a whopping 82% were only eating prey they had killed themselves.

At first glance, the spotted hyena seems hardly more than a misshaped buffoon, let

alone a first-rate killer combining amazing speed, power and scary intelligence. With his sloping back and shuffling, crippled gait, he looks more like a mixture of dog and bear, although he's really more closely related to the cats. A good example of the strength and speed — as well as the boldness — of a big hyena was shown in an incident that took place a few years ago in Zululand. A hunter had just shot and butchered an impala, splitting the carcass into equal 40-pound halves. In broad daylight, a hyena rushed up, grabbed an entire half clear of the ground in his jaws and took off without a pause at full speed.

In back-bush Africa, there's an interesting emotional relationship that has built up over what has to be millions of years between men and animals. Reasonably, big stuff like elephants and hippos are given the same respect as lions. Snakes are merely feared. Even crocodiles, which kill more people than any other carnivore quadruped are oddly — from the white point of view — regarded as just another instrument of Kismet. But, not the hyena. He has the rather dismal distinction of truly being hated, quite a unique reaction from the African who generally shrugs his way along the philosophical path of life anyway. Certainly this outlook is the product of the hyena being the living symbol of death, as even now many tribes carry out the old and sick for hyena food



Capelick considers the spotted hyena one of the most intelligent and fascinating meat-eaters he's ever had to tangle with.

before they die and contaminate perfectly good huts with their wandering spirits. Every snickering, night-borne chuckle is a constant reminder that we're all running out of years and, if you get careless with the next batch of stump puller, *Fisi* may just pull your cork early. When an African laughs himself helpless at the agonized antics of a spear-wounded hyena snapping and pulling out his own guts and literally eating himself alive, he's really whistling in the graveyard. And, he knows it. *Fisi* will have the last laugh.

Personally, I've had some very interesting times with hyenas, although not on a social basis. One particular outbreak of man-eating in Zambia's Northern province several seasons back was especially

fascinating, if not for any great deeds of chest-thumping derring-do on my part, but rather for the black magic quality of the circumstances.

Because of its implied association with death, the hyena has never been threatening of the fabric of mystery and magic. In fact, he's the perfect subject animal for much of the black magic which is, even these days, surprisingly popular in Africa. Hyenas, and to a lesser extent lions and leopards, are widely believed to be the property of certain witches who hire them out for murder at quite reasonable rates. In some areas, they are called "night cattle." In others, they're known by different terms. There have been famous instances of such goings-on, best popularized in Tanzania and Malawi, but the belief is common through almost all the *Bantu* peoples.

Most "Europeans," as all whites are usually referred to in Africa, put the whole lot down as purest *marfi*, an animal substance which is messy to wipe off one's shoe. Maybe I've been out there too long, because I'm just not so sure, and I'm not the only one. Hyenas have been killed with strange, symmetrical marks cut into their hides and even beads knotted into their fur. George Rusby, who was active in the Tanganyika Game Department in the 1940s even reports one tremendous hyena shot that was wearing a pair of khaki shorts! More important, all these animals were killed during epidemics of man-killing and eating.

There were three dead people, all women, by the time reports of the outbreak in the village of Mapili reached me. All had been killed in their huts at night, a fourth being caught and an arm severed before someone came to her aid just a few hours before I arrived. She died of shock and blood loss before any help was administered. As I was always a bit suspicious of hyena killings, I had a good look around. No question about it, the deed had been done by a pair of quite big hyenas, their tracks too clear to have been faked. While I was speaking around the huts, Silent found from the local gossip that, as the women were all young and unmarried, a jealous rival had hired a well-known local witch and her private menagerie to lighten up the competition. I didn't think it would do much for my own official credibility to interrogate the old drunken hag, thereby admitting such a thing was possible. Instead, I decided to hang around a few nights in hope of a shot.

It was the second evening, about 10 p.m. I had watched until dawn the night before and slept almost all day so was very fresh, hunkered on a light platform of boards atop the ruins of an old, clay-walled hut about 10 feet in the air and with a good field of fire, Silent next to me. The moon was good, just a hand's width over a

clear horizon, permitting me to see the sights of the delicate little Rigby .275 Rimless I used for light work. Not very far off, perhaps a half a mile away, I heard the call of a hyena and the answer of another very near it. All was quiet for some 20 minutes as we sat, trying only to move our eyeballs as we were quite exposed. Then, bold as righteousness, two hyenas stepped casually into the open. They paused for a moment, as if waiting for some signal, then went straight for one of the huts. When I was sure both were far enough from cover to give plenty of time for my second shot, I lined up the farthest and swatted him right out of his tracks. Probably confused by the echoing of the shot, the second ran off a few yards and then came back to the dead one just in time to catch a special delivery Kynoch soft-point. Both were dead as free lunch, almost piled together.

We climbed down and gave them a quick once-over to be certain they were finished and were about to head back to my nearby camp when one of the crowd which had come pouring out of the huts shouted to me. I walked back over and saw that a man was pointing at one of the animal's heads and speaking excitedly. By the light of my electric torch, I took a closer look, bending down to examine one of the hyenas' ears and got a very chilly feeling.

Along the outside edge were two side-by-side triangular notches, well healed and obviously old. To my even greater consternation, the other hyena carried the exact same markings. They were in exactly the same place and, in my opinion, far too regular to have been accidental.

As I stood there baffled, the old witch blew in, almost frantic with grief and hate. If she was acting, she deserved an Oscar. After a dozen most original and quite impressive curses, she calmed down and demanded that I pay her 100 shillings each for her "friends" as compensation. Of course, I refused. I only wish I had thought to cut off those ears and dry them; they were certainly thought provoking. That was some years ago, and I'm pleased to advise you that none of my more intimate appendages have fallen off as promised, although I can still stir some hyperactive hackles when I think back on that night.

As Africa has changed by the continued encroachment of man on habitat, the hyena is one of the very few species that has not been overly affected because of his natural symbiosis with man. As far as I'm concerned that's just fine. It wouldn't really be Africa without old *Fisi* hooting and howling his serenade of eternity from somewhere in the smothering bosom of blackness, just to let you know you're not as durable as you may think you are. Doubt it? I dare you to leave your tent open tonight. ■