

African



Assassin

By Peter Hathaway Capstick

The man who was about to die padded softly along the narrow trail, tiny puffs of reddish dust spurting from beneath his crude, auto-tire sandals. He carried his spear easily across his right shoulder as he walked, the honed edges of the iron head flickering with the golden light of late afternoon. Wiping the sheeting sweat from his scar-weltd forehead, he thought about the pot of sorghum beer that would be in the shade of his hut, another two miles down the path, and licked his leathery lips. He thought he could almost taste the sharp flavor on the back of his tongue as he passed the deep, *combretum* thicket, its waxy, green leaves masking deep caverns of shade.

Terror grabbed his chest with the first grunt, short and hard from the tangle to his right. It was close, too close, the man knew as he froze, watching the branches shake as the snorts came nearer. He found his legs in a burst of adrenalin panic as the buffalo broke cover, black, hooked head up, pale gray eyes locked on his. Too frightened to shriek, the man dropped his spear and ran for his life, the thunder of flatiron hooves hammering just over his shoulder. Less than 30 yards ahead a large muSassa tree overhanging the path with fluffy green arms, and hope flooded into the terrified man. He was only two paces from the leap that would save him when the flats of massive horns smashed into the small of his back, driving him against the base of the tree with terrible power. Instantly, the bull hit him again, crushing his upper chest against the rough bark, splintering ribs and clavicles like a lizard under a heavy boot. The man was probably dead before his shattered form could fall over. That was just as well.

Foam blowing over his boiler-tank chest, the buffalo sprang back for a moment, then charged, hooking the cadaver on an icepick horn and dragging it back onto the path. For long minutes he chopped the man like chicken liver with axe-edged hooves the diameter of salad plates. Then, the way a dog will act with a dead snake, he methodically ground what was left of the corpse into the earth by

rolling his ton of weight upon it again and again. Satisfied, the gory hulk grunted again and backed off a few paces, watching to see that his victim did not move. Ten minutes passed before he turned and made his way back into the thicket where he lay down, hurting, from the maggot-crawling, festering wound on his hip.

An hour later, returning from a successful kudu hunt with two clients and four of my native staff, we found the body lying in the trail. We had come from the opposite direction, dry and tired after long hours of tracking, and it wasn't until I had stared at the remains for several seconds that I was even able to recognize what it was. You will see better-looking bodies in plane crashes. The spoor told the story as clearly as if in neon lights and, gaging down the

as his outline became visible. It took him in the center of the chest, just below his tree-trunk neck, and staggered him slightly. The bull was too close for comfort now, so I snapped off a brain shot and saw an eruption of horn boss fly like heavy bark where the big slug clipped him, almost knocking him down as 5,000 foot-pounds shocked his brain. To my definite consternation he was back up again in a flash, like a big, black tennis ball bounding off concrete, bawling and bellowing like a bass banshee. Instinctively, I thumbed the lever and broke the double rifle, the empties pinging in smoky streaks over my shoulder, and loaded the two asparagus-sized cartridges from between the fingers of my left hand. He was almost on me when I belted him with both barrels right in the face. Except for the dim

A Wounded Cape Buffalo Can Be The Dark Continent's Most Dangerous Animal.

dry heaves, I dunked a pair of 500-grain solids in the .470 and unfastened the sling for quick handling. Waving back my clients and the rest of my men, I advanced a few yards up the trail and spotted the bull's track leading into the thicket. Silent swiftly scampered up a tree for a look around. He glanced about for several seconds, then stiffened with a slow nod and pointed into the heavy bush about 30 yards off to my left front. He raised his arm, palm down, parallel to the ground, to indicate that the bull had stood up and was listening for us. I held stock still, then moved a little to give myself an open shooting space in front of the thicket. I must have made a sound. Instantly, there was one hell of a bawl and heavy crashing as the buffalo charged, bulging through the thick bush like it was so much popcorn. He caught the first bullet at 15 yards, just

sensation of meeting a bright red, speeding locomotive in a dark tunnel, that was all I remembered for quite a while.

When I came around, I wasn't sure what to rub first. A gash and lump the size of a teenage cannonball was growing over my blood-filled left eye, and I had enough assorted contusions, abrasions, and bruises to supply a rugby team for the season. I felt like I'd done 15 rounds with King Kong, but closer inspection proved that I was still relatively functional and that the majority of the blood belonged to the late buffalo. Silent, who had witnessed the charge from the tree, explained that the bull had been just about dead when he piled into me, but had made a reflex toss with his horns which caught the muzzle of my rifle hard enough to smash it back up into my face where the rib between the

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barrels had clouted me over the eye, knocking me cold. Both the last two shots had been winners, right through the lights, but his ton of forward motion hadn't given a damn. The clients and gunbearers had levered him off my lower body, and why my legs weren't broken still puzzles me today.

Invisible, my Number Two, came over and dropped something wet and smelly into my hand — a .577 lead ball he had cut from the buff's thigh. Shot there by a poacher with a wire-bound muzzle loader, it had lain festering along the bone, which it had lacked the power to break. The pain must have been frightful, slowly driving the bull to the point where he would charge anything that crossed his path. I sent Quiza back to the hunting car for a tarpaulin and my camera and, when he returned, took a roll of film for the authorities to accompany the report I would have to write. A short while later I got a note saying that it would not be necessary to appear to give evidence at the inquest. The condition of the tribesman's body was ample evidence of the cause of death.

The African Cape buffalo, *Syncerus caffer*, has enjoyed a Jack the Ripper reputation since the first European thwacked one with a muzzleloader more than 300 years ago. He has always been considered a top contender as the Dangerous Continent's most dangerous animal, and there is no question that the sheer physical characteristics of *Mbogo*, *Ajari*, *Bjari* or *Narri*, depending upon dialect, give him a unique package of aggregate attributes that in their total are unequalled by any other member of the "Big Five": lion, leopard, elephant or rhino.

The most impressive fact about the buffalo is that he has virtually no weak points. Jumbo and rhino are myopic in the extreme, but a bull buffalo could read the want ads in dim light across Times Square. The talent of his big, scruffy, thorn-torn ears is incredible, fully the equal of both lion and leopard, either of which he outweighs by many times at no apparent cost in blinding speed and maneuverability. His sense of smell is practically supernatural when he sticks that big, black nose like a No. 10 jam tin into the wind — as good as elephant or rhino and much better than any of the cats. He is a living arsenal of weaponry for use against jerkwater hunters or preoccupied Africans, offering a Chinese menu choice on your shortcut to Glory of horns that can disembowel a locomotive, hooves like split mattock heads, and up to a ton of bulk that can roll you into a fair resemblance of shaggy tollhouse cookie mix. What's more, if you cross him and get caught, he will display a singular lack

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of reluctance, regardless of race, color or creed, to give you a nice home demonstration of his talents.

How really dangerous is the Cape buffalo? In a thoughtful word, plenty. Of course, as would be the case with any dangerous animal that looks as purely malevolent as a buff (Ruark distilled it well when he said that they look at you as if you owe them money), there has been no shortage of "sea stories" to help along his reputation as an advanced felon, charging on sight, an unstoppable mountain bouncing .600 Nitro Express slugs off his horn boss like soggy lima beans. Actually, with properly constructed, nonexpanding bullets of reasonable caliber, buffalo fall quite easily to brain shots if a proper angle can be used for the shot. I once won \$50 in a bet with another pro by driving a bullet from a 7X57 completely through the skull of a big bull.

As is consistent with the current trend to debunk the idea that there is any dangerous game at all, some preservationist writers have tried to paint the buffalo as just another of Mother Nature's sweetsies, absolutely harmless unless hounded by those awful hunters. In a way, this may not be unfounded from their viewpoint and exposure. The "Run, Bambi, It's Man" and "Don't Shoot Him Mister He's A Sheepdog" mentalities rarely waste their time in the thick bush of a hunting concession when they can sit in a zebra-striped minibus at a game preserve and photograph buff that are used to people. They will tell you that they've photographed thousands of buffalo without any incident whatever, and I'm sure they have. What they don't realize is that park buffalo behave entirely differently from "wild" ones, acting more like dairy cattle than anything else, drinking and grazing in daylight, while normal buff lie up in heavy cover during daylight and only come to water at night.

In Botswana in 1970 I had another bull come roaring out of the thorn and give the tail of my big Toyota a stunning thump, but he did nothing beyond cosmetic damage, and I was able to outrun him. In Rhodesia in 1975 I lived in the house of a man who had been killed by a buffalo in the backyard three years before. His tombstone nearby was always a handy reminder not to take *inyata* frivolously. Geoff Broom, who owned the safari firm I worked for in the Matetsi region, was riding with his young son and a dog to inspect a stretch of new track for the coming safari season when a buff blew out of the shadows and stuck a horn through the metal just above and aft the driver's (right-hand) door, creating a three-foot tear that would accommodate a prize watermelon as he ripped free. Geoff was unarmed at the time and damned lucky to

get away without more serious damage.

I have heard hunters, back from their first foray in Africa, usually in Kenya where the buff limit is one per customer, opine that killing their bull was like pole-axing Elsie the Cow. And so it can be — sometimes. If you are lucky enough to find a good bull in the open and swat him where it counts with a big slug, he'll probably roll over and give up the ghost. But, if you flinch and pull your shot from even the heaviest rifle, you had better make sure the disaster insurance is all paid up because you have now got yourself a problem. A big one.

The problem is adrenalin. Although it's true that adrenalin and other high-performance additives are a factor with any large animal when wounded or excited, the Cape buffalo is clearly the champ in the overdrive department. If you don't drop him stone dead or mortally wounded with the first shot, he will completely lose his sense of humor and may get the idea he's invulnerable to bullets, a point he may prove to you over the next few minutes. If he makes you or your hunter follow him into the thick stuff, don't forget that you're likely in for a scrape that won't end until you collect his headskin — or he yours. You can shoot him practically to pieces, if he gives you the chance, but he'll keep coming despite wounds that would disable a tyrannosaurus. Blow his heart into tatters, literally, and he'll have enough oxygen stored in his brain to go 100 yards and still have the moxie to take you apart.

Any dangerous sport, including buffalo hunting, needs practice for any eventuality, so I have become a great believer in Charging Buffalo Drills for my safari clients. Upon arrival at camp, clients spend the first three days of their trip learning the basic elements of buffalo hunting: running, dodging, climbing, rapid reloading and praying, with the major emphasis on invocation of the Deity. Actually, these skills, although they impart a good deal of self-confidence to the paying customers, are superfluous. As any experienced African hand will tell you if you stand him a drink, the *only* sure way to stop a charging buffalo is to take away his credit card. ■

Editor's Note:

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