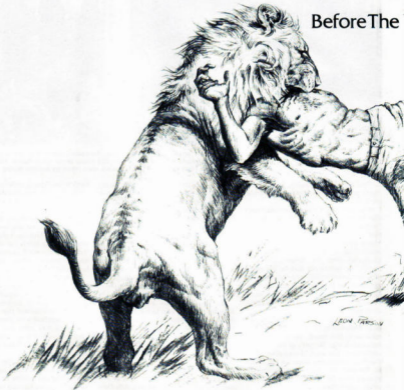


# Death In The

Before The



It's a warm March night in the East African Protectorate in 1898. The smooth, black air around the Indian workers' compound is soft with the promise of the coming rainy season. If there were more of a moon, the half-completed skeleton of the Tsavo Bridge would jut darkly some hundreds of yards away from the field of tents, which loom like strange, pointed khaki mushrooms clustered loosely about the dying eyes of scores of untended campfires. It has been a hard day of work for the more than 2000 imported laborers, so now, at midnight, nearly all are asleep.

One tent contains seven men, six

laborers and one supervisor, *Jemadar* Ugan Singh, whose title denotes a rank of lieutenant in the Indian Army. He is nearest the open fly of the tent, snoring enough to awaken one of the coolies. Irritated, the man sits up and rubs his eyes, glancing about the murk, over the sleeping forms of his fellows, and out the door into the shadowy expanse of the open compound. Wiping away a film of sweat from the close night, he is about to lie back. One does not complain about the snoring of a superior, let alone a *Jemadar*. But, something catches his eye, something darker than the pale shadows, creeping slowly toward the open tent. He blinks as

fear hooks his stomach with long claws, his eyes growing wider. In rising terror he stares as the form ghosts nearer, a tawny wraith flattened against the ground. It pauses for a heartbeat at the door, then instantly lunges at the sleeping Ugan Singh. Thick, white fangs audibly clash against each other as they meet through the flesh of the *Jemadar's* neck, yet he manages to give a strangled shout of "Choro!" — "Let go!" — before, with an irresistible lurch, he is pulled from the tent. At the last instant he is seen wrapping his arms around the giant lion's neck as he disappears into the night.

Ugan Singh does not die easily.

THE AMERICAN HUNTER

# Silent Places

## Tsavo Terror Was Finished, The Demon Lions Would Eat Nearly 100 Victims.

By Peter Hathaway Capstick

### Part I

Copyright © 1981

by Peter Hathaway Capstick



Helpless in the lion's jaws, he is dragged struggling through the thorns, futilely flailing the man-eater with his fists. It's likely the *Jemadar's* unusual size and strength give him too many moments of unwelcome life as the cat continues to pull and carry him away from the growing clamor from the camp. The men back in the tent can hear clearly his repeated gargled attempts to scream. The sounds of his struggle are terrible. After a hundred yards, fate shows some dark mercy in the shape of another huge lion which charges forward and bites him deeply in the chest, killing him. Irritated by the poor table manners of his partner, the first lion growls loudly, struggling to keep hold of his prey, tugging with all the steel-muscled power of his 500-pound body. As the long fangs tear and the pressure is increased, the man's head is torn completely off and

rolls away, landing by chance balanced on the stump of neck, the eyes still open wide and staring, dead pools of dread.

Ignoring the head, the big cat snarls, leaps to grasp the decapitated corpse, and fights briefly with the second lion before both settle down to feed hungrily until the body is consumed but for scattered red scraps of flesh and a few bones. The Tsavo man-eaters have just killed their third official victim, although quite probably Ugan Singh is actually number 10 or 11. This, however, is just a warm-up. Over the next nine months, these two incredibly deadly animals will stall the largest colonial power in the world, Victorian Britain, bringing one of its most important construction projects to a complete halt and one of its less likely citizens to the status of an international hero.

It was known as the "Lunatic Line," so

dubbed by the London press and generally considered the screwiest exploit of an age not shy of sensationalism. Technically and officially called the Mombasa-Victoria-Uganda Railway, it was planned to run from damn near nowhere, the sweltering, east-coast port of Mombasa, to virtually the middle of nowhere, which in those days was a pretty fair description of Lake Victoria. Such an undertaking might not seem very unusual in light of today's technology. But in the 1890s, things were a mite different. If the cost in pounds sterling was virtually obscene, it was downright cheap compared to the price in lives paid by the hordes of Indian coolies imported for their skills and experience. Of the more than 35,000 Indians imported, nearly 9000 were either killed, died or were permanently maimed. More than 25,000 additional laborers of the same force were injured or taken ill, but recovered. The dark, coy virgin called Africa had a very hard bosom.

In itself, the "Lunatic Line" was a master stroke of 19th-century engineering and execution. Started at the coast in 1896, it was not completed until December 19, 1901. Ostensibly, it was created to help combat the slave trade, although the commercial advantages of a wilderness railroad running deep into the heart of Africa's lake country are also obvious. In all, it twisted snake-like 580 miles north-east through the harshest wilderness from Mombasa, across plains and over highlands spanning rivers and gorges, passing through exotic stops such as Voi.

*continued on pg. 59*

*Editor's Note: This is the first of a three-part series condensed from a chapter in Peter Capstick's forthcoming book, Death In The Silent Places, reprinted through special arrangement with St. Martin's Press, Inc. Death In The Silent Places will be available from the NRA Books Service June 1, 1981. Copies can be purchased by using order number ASB 17095. NRA member's discount price is \$12.55 plus \$1.00 postage.*

## Death In Silent Places

continued from pg. 19



Nairobi, and the lakes of Naivasha, at last ending at Kisumu on Lake Victoria. To carve and burrow the "Lunatic Line" through the swamps and highlands by hand labor was an awful undertaking. Yet despite the price, it struggled inexorably inland every day, foot by foot, rail by rail, mile by murderous mile until, in March of 1898, it touched the Tsavo River 132 miles up the line. Of the 162 bridges that would have to be built, none would ever bear a name so synonymous with terror and abject human misery as Tsavo.

It doesn't look like much if you care to climb the steep N'dungu escarpment and gaze over the savage wasteland below. A rock-studded desert of pale, leafless thorn and snagged wait-a-bit bushes make a lousy living from the thick red soil. The only hint of green life is the winding crest of feathery hardwoods along the river. Away to the south where the frosty glow of Kilimanjaro's snows catches the equatorial sun in the distance, you still will see the bridge across the twinkle of cool, running water and the glitter of smooth-worn iron flashing off into the bush. The old rails and weather-beaten bridge certainly don't appear very imposing now, hardly worth the horror their building caused. But there was a time when these few square miles were the center of the greatest animal ring of terror in all of Africa.

The man whose responsibility it became to see the Tsavo Bridge project through turned out to be Lt. Colonel John Henry Patterson, some years later adding the Distinguished Service Order to his monicker. He arrived at Tsavo from Mombasa on March 1, 1898, blissfully oblivious to the lurking panic about to descend upon the site over the next nine months. Although he later wrote a smashing best seller about his misadventures with the Tsavo man-eaters, published by Macmillan in 1907, J. H. was very casual about his own life and career, to the extent that it took me several months to determine what his initials stood for.

An Englishman raised in India who spoke fluent Hindustani, he looks from contemporary photographs to have been somewhere in his 30s at the time of the man-eating outbreak. A perfect pukka Salub in white pith helmet, jodhpurs and riding boots, he was slenderly built and wore a most proper moustache.

Considering the importance of the Tsavo bridge and the necessity of its

completion within weather-dictated schedules, Patterson must have been a well-qualified engineer to have been placed in charge of the whole project. Also, from the way in which he attempted to handle the man-eaters, it's almost certain he had hunted tiger or leopard while in India, as did most British officers when there. In 1909, well after the events of Tsavo, he wrote another book called *In The Grip Of The Nyika* (also Macmillan) which deals with some reminiscences of the Tsavo episode as well as hunting experiences of a later trip to East Africa during which he killed a new species of eland, that continent's largest antelope. It still bears his name as Patterson's Eland. The point is that he was not inexperienced in big game hunting although the difficulties he was to have in trying to kill the lions and the number of times he very nearly became a blue-plate special on their menu seems to indicate he was not possessed of any uncanny skill at the hunting arts besides great persistence.

So much for the times and the man. What about the lions?

If we want to second-guess more than 80 years after the events, the man-eaters of Tsavo were probably rank amateurs, only learning the specialized skill of hunting and killing men through trial and error. The whole area along the track as it passed through southeast Kenya had long been notorious for man-eaters before anybody dreamed of building a railroad there, so their depredations were certainly not without precedent. It would be impossible to surmise the total number of victims of the Tsavo man-eaters. However, they were mature animals when they began giving the railroad problems. The fact that their den, found sometime after their deaths, was littered with remains of native Africans indicates they may have been responsible for nearly 100 killings. Outbreaks of man-eating often follow war, plague or slaving caravans, all of which litter the bush with dead bodies. So these particular man-eaters probably began their career by feeding on coolies who died of disease or injury and were not buried as ordered but dumped in the heavy bush along the right-of-way. This practice would be the same as teaching lions to eat people and seems to have done precisely this.

When Patterson arrived by train at Tsavo, then the end of the line, he found between 2000 and 3000 coolies ganged at the railroad ready to start work. From the record, it seems the lions got there about the same time and began the festivities quietly and fumblingly at first, but clearly recognizing the setup as a literally moveable feast. The railroad laborers still had no idea of the peril to which they were now exposed.

An embarrassed blush of dawn was creeping through the bush when Patterson was shaken awake and told of the snatching of Ungan Singh. Taking

another officer who happened to be at the railroad, a Captain Haslem (who shortly thereafter was murdered by the Kikuyu and his body savagely mutilated), the two men found the pug marks of the killer lion with no difficulty in the sand. They followed the blood-spattered trail to the point where the second lion had entered, stage right. A few yards farther they began feeling fortunate not to have had breakfast. I personally can assure you that what is left of a human being after a pair of man-eaters have done their act would give a garbage grinder the gags. The presence of the *Jemadar's* head, untouched but for the ragged stump of neck, the open eyes staring at them with a horrified expression, was a touch that undid them both to the core, even though with Indian service they would not have been naive to the more unsettling aspects of violent death. With a few coolies, they gathered up the chewed bones and overlooked scraps of the Lieutenant and buried them under a cairn of rocks, carrying the surprisingly heavy head back to camp for identification by the medical officer. Realizing the degree of potential disaster the lions represented to the project as well as the personnel, the shaken Patterson swore to "rid the neighborhood of the brutes." This was to be one hell of a lot more easily vowed than accomplished.

This same evening marked the beginning of one of the most incredible extended episodes ever to happen between man and beast as adversaries. Patterson, with few options open, climbed a tree near the tent where the *Jemadar* was taken and began a vigil, waiting for the killer to return to the place where he had last found food. After several uncomfortable hours, in company with his .303 service rifle and a 12-gauge shotgun loaded with one barrel of slug and the other ball, he heard the lions begin to roar some distance away, the blood chilling thunder coming slowly closer and closer. If there's anything more courage-draining than listening to a pair of man-eaters advertising as they close on your position, it is the sudden stop of the roaring. It leaves you no idea of their location, although their silence means they have begun to hunt. Minutes crawl to a half-hour, staring with aching, unseeing eyes into the darkness, body screaming from the torture of the hard, tree-limb perch. Silence. Not even a murmur came from the terrified men below in their closed tents. Then, from a half-mile away, unearthly screams and shouts razored the night as the man-eaters broke into another tent in a different section of the railroad camp and dragged off a laborer. Frustration welling up, Patterson realized that there was nothing to be done but wait for dawn to investigate. Surely, there would be no sign of the lions around this area tonight, now that they had made a kill. Dugusted and discouraged, he climbed back down and returned to his tent, which

continued on pg. 61

## Death In Silent Places

*continued from pg. 58*

he was sharing with Dr. Rose, a medical officer.

Considering that a man had been killed nearby the night before and another just taken within a half-mile an hour ago, Patterson doesn't precisely tend to stun one with his smarts. His own tent was light canvas, as lion-proof as damp tissue paper, pitched in the open without any sort of barrier, an easy mark for even a dim-witted *siroba*. In the wee hours, both Patterson and Dr. Rose were awakened by something stumbling over the tent ropes. With an even greater display of folly, they went outside with a lantern but saw nothing and returned to bed. The next morning revealed that it indeed had been one of the lions stopping by for a late snack and probably changing his mind about attacking when confused by getting tangled up in the ropes.

The next evening, Patterson decided to try his luck again at the tent where the last coolie was nailed. As he would find later, he took quite a chance walking the half-mile to the place in the dark, followed by a man carrying a lantern and another leading a goat to be used as bait. As further experience proved, light or fire had absolutely no effect in deterring the man-eaters' attacks. They regarded even a bonfire as a rather romantic touch of candlelight to a good dinner. Patterson Sahib, however, lucked out. He and his men made the trip without any surprises with big teeth. Soon, he was up the chosen tree, praying for a shot at his "savage brutes." As the evening wore on, the rainy season chanced to begin, and the Colonel had to sit through a chilling, steady drizzle. At midnight, as if the lions had made a reservation, the usual terrified uproar of Indians sounded from yet another camp. Guess who's come to dinner?

At this point, let's take a harder look at the layout of the large, railhead camp and the pattern of the lion attacks. The bridge was at the end of the track so most of the workers were concentrated over about a square mile around it on the far side of the river. Patterson reckoned them at about 3000, spread out into eight sub-camps.

Since the lions had never been hunted before, the uncanny way in which they always managed to strike a camp while Patterson was waiting in another can be attributed only to luck rather than cunning. Unfortunately, as they were able to avoid the armed man for months, they quickly achieved the reputation of being supernatural demons or devils in the minds of the Indians. This, of course, was considered at first by Patterson and his cohorts as ignorance typical of the coolie laborer. But, after a while, even the Colonel had to be wondering deep in the back of his mind. ■