

# Death In The



As is so frequently the attitude of native Africans, the Indian laborers at the Tsavo railroad camp were not especially frightened or apprehensive about being the lions' next victims. The attitude reported by Patterson was apparently based on the odds being slim, with so many men around to choose from, of getting converted into cat food. Man-eaters or not, the weeks passed into months, and the temporary works for crossing the Tsavo River were completed, enabling the laying of track on the far side. The main labor force moved with the track, farther and farther from Tsavo, leaving only a few hundred workers with Patterson and his medical staff to finish the permanent bridge. All this greatly changed the dynamics of the situation.

Up to this time, Patterson had dutifully and unsuccessfully hunted the lions, using every tactic he could think of — waiting up all night and even resorting to some suicidal daylight forays into the unimaginably thick thorn *nyika* on both sides of the tracks for miles. This was really a very brave but futile gesture, as he knew only too well that all the odds favored the lions

seeing or hearing the hunter first and perhaps having an early dinner that particular day. Unfortunately — or perhaps fortunately — he saw nothing despite his efforts, and at night the lions continued to kill and eat people just about everywhere the Colonel wasn't, hitting north if he was south, or east if he was waiting west. Even so, if matters had been maddening with a widespread camp previously, they reached full-blown panic when the main labor force moved up the line and the Indians assigned to work on the permanent bridge realized that the chances of being chopped had increased tenfold.

Patterson Sahib must have been quite persuasive with the remainder to get them to stay since now they were clustered in one camp to the presumed shopping convenience of the lions. Only by permitting the men to knock off all work to build towering, thick *bomas* — ferociously spiked high fences of thorn — around every group of tents and huts would they even consider staying. The results of this measure well illustrate what many professional hunters and game officers have

found over the years since Patterson's Peril, which is that it is for all practical purposes impossible to build a *boma* or *zireba*, as it's called in upcountry Kenya, high and strong enough to keep out a determined, man-eating lion. I know it doesn't make much sense, but as Patterson was to discover, lions, even with their relatively thin skins and sensitive paws, have some Houdini-like method of penetrating incredibly thick and dense thorn barriers soundlessly and emerging with little more than a few scratches. Adding insult, they then normally pull their kill back through the barrier on the way out. In all the man-kills at Tsavo, only once was a body left stuck in the thorns. The cat apparently was unable to force his way out with the corpse. Even when the *bomas* were built, though, despite all-night fires and the constant clatter of a bunch of empty oil tins being rattled steadily by the night watchman, men continued to be taken from their tents almost every night.

Near the main campground stood the hospital compound of the departed main force, left behind under the care of the bridge builders. Surrounded by a very

# Silent Places

Despite Fences, Fires, Bullets  
And Patterson's Schemes,  
The Man-Eaters Increased  
Their Gruesome  
Nightly Raids.

By Peter Hathaway Capstick

Part II

Copyright © 1981 by Peter Hathaway Capstick

heavy and high *boma* presumed to be lion proof, it was somewhat isolated. It was here, early one evening, that a hospital assistant heard a small noise and opened his tent front to see what it was. To his understandable horror, a tremendous lion was standing a few yards away, looking right at him. As he froze, paralyzed with fear, the lion started to spring at him, which shook him out of his stupor and sent him reeling into a box of glass medical supplies. This fell with a shattering crash and startled the cat, which ran to another part of the compound and jumped through the walls of a tent containing eight sick and injured Indians. Two of them were badly lacerated by the lion's claws. A third was killed on the spot and pulled through the ice-pick-thorn *boma*, probably looking like a sack of bloody cole slaw when he reached the other side. The two wounded coolies lay where they fell under a piece of torn canvas all night long.

Not illogically, Patterson had the survivors moved to a new hospital closer to the main camp and had an even heavier enclosure built around it. All the patients

were "safe" inside before nightfall. I find it interesting that John Henry had gotten the idea from somebody that lions tend to visit recently abandoned camps and, therefore, decided to sit up all night in the vacated hospital where the lions had struck the night before. Armed to the molars, he was halfway through the night when — what else — the new hospital exploded into a high babble of terrified human voices. The lions had won the deadly shell game again.

Patterson and Dr. Brock followed the track after listening to the witnesses, finding that it ran only some 400 yards into the bush. The end of the trail held the inevitable horror — a well-chewed skull and jaws, some larger bones and part of the palm of one hand with a couple of fingers still stuck on. Encircling one finger was a silver ring which, along with the teeth, Patterson arranged to have shipped back to the man's widow in India.

Well, what now? What else? Move the hospital again and build a thicker and higher barrier. This being done and the enclosure finished by dark after much hard work by the men, Patterson and Dr.

Brock, a medical officer and fellow lion hunter, decided their next round of strategy. Still hooked on the notion that lions love to visit deserted camps rather than those filled with nice, juicy people, they left a couple of tents standing in the one-day-old hospital compound where the lions had struck the night before and tied a trio of cows in them for bait, despite the fact that the lions had thus far shown a clear disinterest in anything but human flesh. This night, however, rather than sitting up in a tree or hiding in a tent, the

*continued on pg. 62*

*Editor's Note: This is the second 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 Book 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 The Silent Places

*continued from pg. 41*



two men had a railroad car pulled up on a nearby track siding close to the hospital where they would set their ambush.

It was surprisingly late by the time the two men finished dinner and, with astonishing lack of caution, walked the entire mile through the dark to the railroad car, getting set up at 10 o'clock. The railroad car had a "Dutch" door design and Patterson and Brock kept their vigil outside the thorn corral with the bottom half of the door closed and the top half open for a shooting port. The two men faced the abandoned hospital, which they could not even see in the darkness.

A few hours passed with oppressive, stygian silence, and the hunters became restless. Then, with bone-chilling crispness, a dry stick cracked somewhere outside. Instantly, nobody was bored. A few minutes later a dull "thud" could be heard, just the sort of sound a lion would make on landing after jumping over the *boma*. The cattle stirred nervously but then settled down again. Silence crept back like an invisible fog through the blackness, but it was not the silence of emptiness. Patterson, who was half-mad with frustration for a shot at the killers, suddenly got another one of his bright ideas. He proposed to Brock that the doctor stay in the car while he got out and lay on the ground below, hoping to see the lion better if it came in their direction with its kill. Brock, fortunately, was still mentally firing on all cylinders and dissuaded Patterson from leaving the shelter of the goods wagon. As they would find out in just a few seconds, it was superb advice, for at that very instant, at least one of the lions had spotted them and was cooing up for a quick, decisive charge.

What neither man realized, besides the fact that they were now the bait, was that the hospital *boma*, ordered carefully locked, was in fact wide open. So, while they were expecting the sound of a lion bulling his way out through the wall of the fence with a dead cow, in actuality the lion or lions were never inside the enclosure at all but had been prowling around the railroad car all this time!

As they continued to stare out the top of the door, Patterson suddenly felt a mixed thrill of fear and excitement, fancying he saw something dark edging with lethal stealth toward them. However, his eyes were so strained by prolonged staring that he was afraid to trust them, concerned that if he fired and the blob turned out to

be only a shadow or his imagination, any chance to kill the lions would be missed. Under his breath he asked Brock if he saw it too, but the doctor was careful enough not to answer. Or, maybe he never had time.

The silence throbbed on for the space of a few more seconds, and then the dark shape was in the air, launched straight at the open door. "The lion!" Patterson shouted involuntarily as both men fired, blinding themselves with the muzzle flashes. Their ears deafened as the twin crash of shots reverberated beneath the sheet-iron roof of the wagon. In the confusion, neither man saw what had become of the lion, which must have sheered away at the shots. For certain, had they not been so alert, one or the other would have been killed. As it was, the big cat was long gone and first light showed that Brock's bullet had struck the sand close by a pug mark while Patterson's was never found. It had, however, not touched the charmed "demon" lion, as no blood or other damage showed on the spoor.

By simple mathematical interpolation, it's a fair guess that the Tsavo man-eaters killed and ate between 30 and 35 railroad personnel between the beginning of March and the 23rd of April. Additionally, there were bound to have been some African victims which would possibly raise the fatality total to 40. Yet, from Patterson's records of dates and events, it became clear that the ambush that he and Brock made from the railroad car had at least succeeded in throwing a scare into the lions since they left the Tsavo Bridge area and proceeded up the line to the advanced railhead, where two men were carried off on successive nights shortly after the 23rd. Another was killed at a place called Engomani, some 10 miles away. The man-eaters liked Engomani, and they hit it twice more the same week, killing and eating one man and tearing up another so badly that he died in a couple of days. Tsavo remained unmolested, for the moment.

The weeks trickled past and pooled into months. The coolies at the bridgehead gradually began to lose their fear of the man-eaters, sleeping outside again as if the "demon" lions had never existed. Constant reports reached Patterson of their continued terrorizing of other places, but they had kept their distance from Tsavo since the big surprise back in April. On the other hand, the Colonel realized that they could return at any moment and take up where they had left off. So he decided to have an appropriate reception catered for their homecoming.

Patterson launched himself into the design and construction of an elaborate lion trap. It was really quite a slick affair made out of available materials of railway ties and sleepers, tram-rails, telegraph wire and heavy chain, divided into two com-

*continued on pg. 64*

## Death In The Silent Places

*continued from pg. 62*

partments. One section was to hold the lion, and the other was to accommodate the human bait that would have to be used. The idea was to utilize a sliding door in the rear of the trap to admit the men who, once inside, would be completely safe because the compartment was separated from the front one by a grid of heavy iron rails only three inches apart, their ends deeply embedded in thick wooden sleepers. The front door, which would be open to admit the lion trying to reach the bait in the rear, was a powerful and flexible curtain of short lengths of iron rail wired to logging chain that hung down on either side of the entrance when in the closed position. A trip-release was rigged by means of a spring concealed in the dirt of the floor which, when touched, triggered a lever holding the folding door open over the trap's mouth. Upon touching the hidden spring, which he would be bound to do, the lion would cause the heavy door to come crashing down and lock by wedging its lower edge between two carefully secured iron rails sunk into the ground at the mouth. Pretty tricky, old Patterson.

One particularly dark night several months later, the Tsavo bridgehead was again aroused by the all too familiar screams of terror as one of the lions was discovered breaking through the *boma* of a compound. One thing was immediately apparent: the lions had gained in boldness and daring to a degree far beyond their previous behavior. On this first night of their return engagement, it's odd the lions even bothered breaking into a *boma* since there were many men ripe for the picking sleeping outside. They must have been overlooked or the man-eaters had fallen into the habit of finding food inside the thorn enclosures and didn't want to lose their touch. Although the alarm was given and sticks, stones and firebrands thrown at the lion, he remained undeterred, charging into the panicked coolies and killing one whom he methodically dragged back through the thorn. Gone now was the nicety of removing the corpses several hundred yards into the night before feeding. As soon as he was clear of the fence, the lion was joined by his companion, and together they completely ate the body within 30 yards of the spot where the kill had been made. So brazen were they that they paid not the slightest attention to the shots fired at them by a *Jemadar*, a lieutenant in the Indian army.

Although there was very little left of the coolie's body, Patterson elected not to bury the scraps in the desperate hope that the lions would return the next night to the same spot. One can realize his need to take any opportunity, but it would be thought that he would by now understand

that these lions did not, at least by pattern, normally return to the same place where they had killed the night before, a fact that had kept them alive so long, so far. As usual, halfway through the long night he heard an uproar in the distance that made it clear the lions had struck a camp two miles away.

It hardly seems possible, but things began to get even worse. As has been mentioned, so far only one lion had been the actual killer while the other kept back, merely joining in the feeding. Not any more. Now both lions began to attack together, each catching its own separate meal. Thus, instead of one man a night being taken, two was now often the case. The shyer lion, which had not been killing until now, was still inexperienced, as is evidenced by the killing of two Swahili porters at the end of November. One was immediately carried off through the thorns and eaten, but the second continued to moan for a long time. When the men finally got up enough courage to investigate, they found him suspended in the *boma*. It was the only failure of the lions to escape with a victim through the thick thorn barriers. He was still alive — for all practical purposes crucified — in the morning when Patterson saw him, but he was so horribly mangled by teeth, claws and thorns that he died before he reached the hospital.

Several nights later, the pair of cats glibly pulled some poor beggar right out of the middle of the largest camp, which was quite close to the iron hut of a permanent right-of-way inspector. While the victim was being eaten right outside the main camp, the inspector, named Dalgairns, fired more than 50 shots at the sound of the feeding lions. They paid not the least attention as bullets whined all around them. Finally finishing the man, they casually got up and wandered off a short distance, probably burping demurely.

Patterson met with Dalgairns the next morning, and found the inspector believed he had hit at least one of the killers. This seemed hardly likely considering his description of the lions staying where they were under fire. But, perhaps there was some chance that Dalgairns had scored since the spoor contained an odd, trailing mark that looked like a broken leg being dragged.

After some mighty careful sneaking through the scrub brush, the two men were frozen in their tracks by sudden growling from a nearby thicket. Rifles ready, they picked their way forward until spotting what Patterson thought was a lion cub crouched in a clump of brush. As they got closer, it turned out to be what was left of the body of the coolie, the legs, one arm and half the body eaten. The stiff fingers of the remaining arm trailing in the sand as the corpse was carried had made the strange drag mark. By the time this

was figured out, the lions had disappeared into the heavy bush where tracking was impossible.

*That* did it. If the "demon" theory had had its adherents before, the firing of 50 rounds without a hit was enough to convince nearly anybody that they were dealing with a lot more than lions. The same day, December 1st, 1898, the entire labor force packed it in and was waiting to speak to Patterson on his return with the shreds of the dead coolie. The meeting didn't last long. The men simply stated that they had come to work for the government, not to be a delicatessen for a couple of devils.

Of course, not all the Indians left, and a good deal of courage has to be recognized in those who decided to stick around despite the very good chance of becoming a coolie on rye. From Patterson's description, I would imagine that little more than 100 laborers stayed. They spent their whole time constructing "lion-proof" shelters practically anywhere out of reach, such as on the tops of water tanks, roofs, girders, trees, or any other place that

**5000 DOGS** Chandler Kennels, world's largest showing dog kennel offers the sportman the largest selection of Pointers, Setters, Brittanys. All dogs trained exclusively on wild birds under natural conditions. All dogs registered out of top bloodlines. Trial allowed on all trained dogs. We now train outside showing dogs for the public. Send \$1.00 for price list or better call or come by Chandler Kennel's.



**CHANDLER KENNELS**  
P.O. Box 88, Mexico, TN 37667  
Call 615-562-5991, Helen "Jr." Chandler, Owner

seemed safe. Some of the men decided to go down rather than up, digging deep pits in the floors of their tents where they would sleep at night with heavy logs pulled over for protection. Some of this was a bit overdone, especially building shelters in the trees, as some very frightened Indians found out one night. One particular tree was so overloaded with lashed-on beds to each substantial branch that it actually toppled over from the weight just as the lions were killing a man beneath it. Coolies were scattered everywhere around and almost on the cats. To their extraordinary good luck, the lions couldn't have cared less, ignoring the panic-stricken men for the one they had already killed. ■