

# Death In The Silent Places



With A Little Bit Of Luck  
And A Lot Of Shooting, Patterson Finally  
Puts An End To The Man-Eating Madness.

Part III

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## By Peter Hathaway Capstick

Early December was the period when the most improbable and incredible incidents of the whole reign of terror occurred, the first of these centering around a District Officer named Whitehead who had been asked by Patterson to come up to Tsavo and lend a hand with his lions. Whitehead's note of acceptance advised that he should be expected about dinner time on December 2, his train being due at Tsavo Station at 6:00. The Colonel waited dinner for some time in hopes of the arrival of the District Commissioner but finally decided that for some reason, Whitehead had postponed his trip until the following day.

During his late meal, Patterson heard several shots fired but paid them no mind since gunfire was no rarity in an area of man-eating activity. Finishing his dinner, he proceeded to take his position for the night in a structure he had had built atop

an elevated girder, a heavy cage of crossed ties offering a good field of fire. Only a few minutes after he settled down, he was startled to hear the clear and now unmistakable sound of the lions eating a man, crushing bones and purring only about 70 yards away.

When daylight started to bloom, Patterson climbed stiffly down from his fortress and started toward the place where he had last heard the lions. On the way, he was completely nonplussed to run into none other than his missing guest, District Commissioner Whitehead, who looked as if he'd spent quite an interesting evening. Astonished, Patterson asked where on earth he'd come from and why he hadn't turned up the night before. The engineer shut up when he saw that the back of the man was a mass of shredded cloth and clotted blood from four long claw marks that had scored the skin and meat. While having his wounds dressed at Patterson's quarters, Whitehead recounted what had happened in the earlier darkness.

The train had been very late, arriving well after sundown. Whitehead, along with his sergeant of native troops, a man called Abdullah, had elected to walk to Patterson's camp along a track spur that ran through a rise cut some four or five feet deep to reduce the grade, leaving a lip of earth on each side. Abdullah walked behind with a lantern. All went well until they were in the middle of the cut when, without warning, a lion sprang off the embankment, smashing Whitehead to the ground and tearing his back with a paw stroke as he tried to grip the man. By more good luck than planning, the impact caused Whitehead's carbine to fire, startling the lion enough that it left him and swarmed over the native sergeant. Abdullah had time only to say, "Eh, *Bwana, simba,*" or "Hey, boss, lion," a wonderfully distilled observation. In the same moment, although Whitehead was able to get off another shot from a few yards and miss cleanly, the lion and Abdullah were gone over the embankment. Of course, it had been the body of Abdullah that Patterson had heard being eaten while in the fortress, which solved the mystery of the kill, although darkly. Just what Whitehead had been doing since the attack was never recorded, but it's probable he spent the night up a tree.

Confirming the African version of what it rains it pours, the same day, December 3, reinforcements arrived under a Mr. Farquhar, the Superintendent of Police, who had in tow some 20 sepoy (native troops of the Indian Army) armed with Martini rifles. Together with Patterson, Whitehead, Farquhar, the sepoy and other sportsmen officers, there was now quite a sizable army arrayed against the lions. Not only that, but the lion trap was given a fine tuning and set with two sepoy, armed to the eyeballs, as bait. With riflemen hanging from every tree and elevated position in sight, darkness fell with a tangible feeling of expectancy. Nothing happened until about 9:00 when, with a wild surge of satisfaction, Patterson heard the rumbling clank of the lion trap being sprung, and the heavy door falling into place, echoing over the Bridgehead.

Strangely, nothing happened at all for the first several minutes, except that the

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*Editor's Note: This is the third 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.*

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night was filled with a frenzy of roars from the lion, which was lashing itself against the bars. Despite their orders to open fire immediately if a lion should enter the trap, the sepoys were huddled in the rear of the bait compartment, paralyzed with terror. After some time, the voice of Superintendent Farquhar reached them, shouting for them to shoot. Shoot they did. As fast as they could load and fire they blindly opened up with the Martinis, .450 caliber bullets whipping and whining off in every direction but the right one. Branches fell and dirt blossomed as the score or more shots erupted until an impossible, completely insane thing happened. A bullet blanged into one of the door's rails where it was secured with telegraph wire and cut it. The end of the rail fell free, and the lion squeezed out to evaporate into the night.

As if Patterson hadn't learned by then, bad luck has a way of rubbing it in. Six days later, on the ninth, after the main party of hunters had left in disgust, he was leaving his *bona* just after dawn when a screaming Swahili popped up, running toward him yelling, "*Simba! Simba!*" and looking back over his shoulder. Patterson stopped him and found out that both lions had tried to nab a man from the camp nearest the river but had missed and killed a donkey instead, which they were at this moment eating a short distance away. The Colonel dashed back into his tent for the double-barrel express rifle lent him by Farquhar in case just such a chance might turn up. Loading it, he prevailed upon the African to return and show him where the lions were dining on the donkey. (They must have been very hungry, as this is the first recorded case of their taking other than human food.) All went just peachy with the stalk, Patterson even being able to discern the outline of one of the cats through the heavy bush, but he held fire for a more open chance. Naturally, the native stepped on a rotten branch, and the lion melted quickly back into heavier cover. Practically hysterical at the idea of missing yet another chance, Patterson ran back to camp to round up a crew of coolie beaters and all the cans, drums and other noisemakers they could lay their hands on.

As quickly as possible, he arranged them around the far side of the thicket the lion had entered with instructions to give him time to cover the down-side of the thicket before starting the beat to drive the lions out. He sneaked back to the other side, finding a termite hill near a well-worn game trail that it seemed reasonable the lion would use. Hiding behind it, he got ready just before the first clatter of metal and blare of horns began. Almost immediately, to his excited joy, a gigantic, maneless lion swaggered out onto the trail and, with looks behind him, started

toward Patterson. The angle was such that the man was not completely concealed by the termite mound, but the big cat didn't notice him until they were only 15 yards apart and the hunter made a slow movement of raising the double-barrel to lock the sights on the man-eater's brain. The lion recoiled in surprise back onto his haunches. But, too late. Patterson nestled the front bead into the wide "V" of the rear sight and squeezed off the shot.

Should you be under the impression that the most terrifying sounds in the world of big game hunting are the close snarl of a man-eater or the shrieking trumpet of a bull elephant right over your head, you're wrong. It is the cold, dead, metallic *click* of the firing pin falling on a defective cartridge primer. It is one of the true sounds of death.

It may have been the cartridge that was defective; perhaps the firing pin mechanism itself was broken. No matter. To the good luck of Patterson's future readership and his creditors, the beaters were now close enough that the lion was forced to run, almost vanishing into the heavy bush before Patterson even realized that he had a second barrel, loaded and ready to fire with a mechanism independent from the first. At last, he shot again and was finally rewarded by an answering snarl from the lion, indicating a hit. But the blood trail stopped abruptly, and the track was lost on rocky ground. It just didn't seem fated that Patterson was to kill the lions.

But there's one thing you have to give John Henry: he doesn't dazzle you with footwork, but he sure hangs in there. Heading back to camp, his spirits badly needing garters, he was somewhat cheered to find that there was quite a bit left of the donkey, perhaps enough that the lion would return for the rest that night. Despite earlier experiences, he had a *machan* or raised shooting platform erected a few yards from the carcass since there were no handy trees. It wasn't much, just four poles sunk into the earth, inclined toward each other at the tops with a plank lashed into place as a seat. The Colonel wired the defunct burro to a nearby stump so it couldn't be dragged away and, at sundown, climbed up to face a night of utter, moonless dark and the savage silence of creeping death.

*Crack!* The snapping of a twig sounded like a sonic boom in the stillness and jolted Patterson out of his reverie. His ears hollow with the rush of his own blood, he could hear the tiniest rustling of a large body picking its way through the dry grass and bushes. Silence again. So quiet it was loud. Then, a long, deep, drawn-out sigh from very close, followed by another creep of movement and a nasty snarl. The lion had spotted the man.

Patterson was to have considerable time to reconsider his stupidity in building the

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machan in the first place because, as soon as J.H. was seen, the lion ignored the donkey and resolutely began to stalk the man. It was a war of nerves in the classic sense, and it's also clear that the lion probably had a lot more nerve than the worn-out Colonel. For a terrifying two hours, the lion sneaked round and round the tree platform, searching for a weak point. Patterson tried to keep absolutely still, expecting a charge any second. The man was afraid even to blink his eyes, but at last, he could barely make out a loggy form against the whitish thorn bushes. Patterson raised the rifle as the big cat gathered itself, stationary, mere feet below. At the shot, there was a roar that seemed to rock the platform, followed by the sounds of the cat thrashing and jumping. Although the lion was now invisible, Patterson continued to fire as fast as he could at the noise, which finally subsided into a series of deep groans and sighs. At last all sound stopped.

Patterson still did not quite trust his luck and postponed a search for the lion's body until morning in case it wasn't yet dead. Back at camp, first light was awaited with a wild party, the African contingent particularly uninhibited with a leaping dance of triumph. At last, dawn crept in tie-dyed majesty through the shadows, and with a group of men, Patterson returned to the scene of the shooting.

Over the hours of waiting, he had convinced himself that somehow the cat had escaped again — he could hardly be blamed in light of his previous experiences — so, his shock at rounding a bush and seeing the lion crouched as if ready to spring can be imagined. Before he fired again, he noticed that it was dead. The festivities began all over again, but when things settled down a bit, he had an opportunity to examine the carcass. As lions go, this was no 90-pound weakling, but a tremendous animal nine feet, eight inches from tail-tip to nose, 45 inches at the shoulder and requiring eight men to carry it back to camp to be skinned. Two bullets had been effective, one in the hind leg, and the killer behind the left shoulder and through the heart.

The news of the man-eater's death spread like a grass fire through the bush and along the rail line until hundreds of congratulatory telegrams and scores of fascinated visitors poured into the bridge-head. For the moment everybody seemed to have forgotten a not very minor item: there were two man-eaters of Tsavo.

A couple of nights later the surviving lion cleared up any hopeful speculation that it might have retired. A permanent way inspector was awakened by the sound of something prowling around his bungalow and verandah. Thinking it just a drunken coolie, he shouted angrily through the door for him to go away but

luckily did not open the door. Quite probably because the remaining coolies were by now well protected and difficult to catch and because the man-eater was certainly hungry, the lion vented its frustration and appetite by killing and eating two of the inspector's goats.

Hearing of the incident the next morning, Patterson decided to sit up near the hut that evening, waiting in a vacant iron shanty that had a rifle loop-hole in the side. Just outside, he tied three goats to a heavy length of iron rail. All was quiet through the night until just at dawn, when the lion finally made an appearance, killed one of the goats and dragged the others away, rail and all. We have no idea why Patterson didn't fire, nor does he offer an excuse.

When the sun was fully up, Patterson and a small party followed the drag mark of the rail some 400 yards into the bush and smack into the lion, which was still having breakfast. This time, however, he did not slink away but suddenly charged. With a remarkable demonstration of good sense, all native personnel quickly disappeared up the nearest tree while the Colonel and one of his white assistants stayed put. The lion, for some reason, broke off the charge, although the question again arises as to why neither Patterson nor the assistant fired a shot. After throwing some stones into the bushes where the lion had run, the men came on the dead goats, two of them hardly touched. Back to the graveyard shift for Patterson.

Having learned a lasting lesson from the earlier night in the rickety *machan*, he had a very strong platform erected a few feet from the dead goats and, as he was thoroughly exhausted, brought along his Indian gunbearer, Mahina, to help keep watch. Several hours into the vigil, when Patterson was just dozing off, he felt Mahina grab his arm and point in the direction of the goats. John Henry grabbed the double-barrel shotgun loaded with solid slugs and waited, eyes peeled for movement. In a few moments the lion appeared between some bushes and passed almost directly beneath the platform. The Colonel fired both barrels almost at once and was overjoyed to knock the big cat down. As he switched to the .303 magazine rifle, the lion bounced back up and evaporated into the bush in a hail of random bullets. When at last dawn came, the two men followed up the blood spoor with drooping spirits. At first, there was quite a lot of blood; however, it ran out shortly, and the track was lost on rocky ground.

The next 10 days were filled with increasing hope that even though no *corpus delicti* had been located, the lion might have died of the effect of its wounds. Although nobody had been attacked, neither did anyone let down their guard. This was just as well. On the

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night of December 27, the old horror started again when an eruption of shouts rose from a crew of trolley-men who slept in a tree near Patterson's boma. It being a densely cloudy night with the moon hidden, the most the Sahib could do was send a few slugs in the lion's direction, which drove him off without securing a kill.

As darkness fell, Patterson was again aloft, in the same tree the trolley-men had been roosting in. It was a perfect night for a change, the moon full and flooding the bush with a strong, silver glow that gave excellent visibility. Again, Mahina was in tow and slept while his boss took first watch. At midnight, they changed and Patterson fell soundly asleep until about 2:00 a.m. when he was awakened by a strange, uncanny feeling that something was wrong. He was about to shrug it off, when he thought he saw something move among some low bushes, silver-plated in the moonlight. As he continued to stare, he was startled to find that the strange sensation was quite correct: the man-eater was carefully stalking them.

Fascinated in a crawly way, Patterson marvelled at the flowing, soundless skill of the lion stealing toward him, a clear demonstration of its experience as it took advantage of the smallest particle of cover. Using his head and determined to wait until the lion was as close as possible, J.H. remained still until the great cat was a mere 20 yards away, a tawny moon-washed form flattened against the sandy earth. Slipping the .303 into position, the Colonel sent a hot whiplash of lead into the lion's chest and heard the meaty impact of the bullet over the muzzle report. A terrific growl blew over the hunters as the killer turned in a blink and ran off with a series of great, smooth bounds. In the thin cover he was in sight long enough for Patterson to get off three more shots, the last of which brought another snarl. Then, he was gone. It was another long wait until dawn.

As soon as it was light enough to see the trail, Patterson, Mahina and an African tracker immediately gave chase to the wounded lion, the Indian carrying a Martini carbine which, in his hands, was as useful as a martini cocktail. With a good blood spoor, the men were able to cover ground quickly as the bush became denser. After no more than a quarter-mile, they were stopped by a ferocious growl right in front of them. Peering carefully through the cover, Patterson could make out the lion clearly, its lips drawn back to expose thick, long fangs in warning. At his shot, the lion began a determined, flat-out charge, catching another bullet as he got going, which knocked him down, but he regained his feet and kept on coming like a nightmare. Another aimed shot had no effect whatever. The .303 is no cannon;

then neither is it a pop-gun. But Patterson dropped it and reached behind him for the heavier caliber Martini, which should have been immediately passed to him by Mahina. If Patterson was already half-panicked at not being able to stop the lion with accurately placed shots, the empty air his fist closed around must not have added greatly to his confidence.

Mahina, who had reached the immediate conclusion that discretion is the better part of standing against wounded, charging, man-eating lions, was by now well up a tree. So was the carbine. Unarmed, Patterson, demonstrating an amazing understanding of the concept, was not far behind. At the moment the lion reached the tree, Patterson was just out of reach. Had one of his bullets not chanced to break the lion's hind leg, apparently one of his favorite lion shots,

the Colonel might well have gained fame as the highest-ranking meal the Tsavo lions had eaten. Seeing that it was too late, the lion limped back toward the thicket it had come from.

As it retired, Patterson now had time to pry the carbine out of Mahina's hands and get off another shot. To what must have been his surprise, the cat fell in a heap and appeared to be dead. Appearances can be deceiving. Patterson jumped from the tree and, like the greenest Bwana in Nairobi's growing cemetery, ran up to the lion. To his consternation, it jumped back up at very close range and came for him again.

A carbine slug in the boiler room put it back down while a final tenth shot kept it there as it chewed a stick to shreds, thrashing out its last moments. At bloody, long last the man-eaters of Tsavo were dead. ■