

# One Last Look

by John Wootters

The lion lay atop his termite hill, half-asleep in the heat of the Botswana noon. He was lazily aware of the goodness of the shade and of the smell of the lioness who lolled beside him, and of the annoyance of the tsetse flies. His empty belly was complaining, but the lion was accustomed to that; the pride would hunt that night. Game was plentiful and it would not be difficult to kill. He was profoundly contented, the unchallenged master of his world. He lifted his massive head and yawned, twitching away a persistent tsetse.

Then a new sound reached his ears, a faint unfamiliar discordance in the Okavango bushveldt. It was compounded of a subtle chugging and the whine of gears in low range, the murmur of cleated tires struggling against deep sand and an occasional muffled metallic thump.

The lion had never seen a motorcar during his dozen years of life, and had no reason to be alarmed by the sounds, even as they steadily grew louder and louder. He merely pricked up his big, rounded ears and listened with a sort of indolent curiosity.



In the Land Rover, heat and boredom had silenced all conversation. Lionel Palmer muscled the car along the sandy ruts while my wife and I gazed almost unseeing at the passing bush. Not even the scurrying of a startled troop of baboons or the occasional frozen band of impala, staring at this mechanical apparition, could penetrate our private thoughts deeply enough to break the silence in the car. On their seat atop the cab, trackers, Soaconga and John, rhythmically swished their wildebeest-tail fly-whisks and probed the thickets and savannahs with their all-seeing eyes.

We were hardly more than a mile from camp and expected to see no important game, least of all the one animal I had come halfway around the world to find . . . and so the lion and I first saw each other with mutual surprise and the saga began.

Soaconga's stick rapped insistently upon the windshield, and Lionel slammed on the brakes, leaning out the window to be told in a tense whisper what the boys had seen. The stick was pointed, quivering, at a termite mound off to the left, and Lionel offered a one-word translation, "*Lion!*"

Then I saw him, still stretched out in the shade, less than 100 yards away. He was not my first African lion; a few days earlier we'd tracked a pride for four miles and I had refused to shoot the enormous male because he had no mane. This lion, however, was obviously well-maned; I could see at a glance that he was a trophy. But Lionel, from the other side of the car, couldn't quite get the clear view that every professional hunter wants in order to evaluate a trophy.

While he was trying to make up his mind, the lions made up theirs and decided that this new, chugging, clanking animal which had stopped to look at them was bad news. In a flash, the four of them were on their feet and streaking for cover. I watched them go, as though in slow motion, with the muscles bunching and uncoiling under their tawny coats and the male's great ruff pressed back by the speed of his going. A moment after the animals disappeared into the bush, I sat shaken, wondering at the incredible detail my eyes had recorded as the lions had run across the sun-hammered, lion-colored opening. I

clearly recalled the black tufts of hair at the male's elbows and tail-tip. I could have counted his ribs where the hide flowed over them as he bounded along. I even noticed the almost imperceptible spotting, left over from his long-gone cubhood, along his flanks and thighs. I had *seen* him with the same laser-like intensity with which he himself might have fixed his gaze on his intended prey, the way a pointing dog projects his sensors at a bird, or a fox locks hypnotically upon the rabbit he stalks.

It all happened in seconds, and then Lionel was tearing at the door handle, yelling at me to get my rifle, and the boys were scrambling down over the hood. The car was bedlam. I grabbed the .416 and racked a cartridge into the chamber, and then backed the bolt out an inch to make certain the round was really there and properly engaged by the extractor. As I ran after the sprinting trackers, I remembered to wind the magnification on the variable scope down to its lowest setting. And then the bush closed in around us and the running stopped. The lions could be anywhere; the lions *were* everywhere, unseen. We could even smell them. Grains of sand were still trickling into their tracks at our feet, but the lions could have stopped. The chase was over and the *hunt* had begun. Lionel's .458 came up to the ready, his right hand resting on the raised bolt-handle which he prefers to a safety catch, and we closed up behind the trackers, scanning the dense cover around us while they trailed.

It turned into a long afternoon. We trailed the lions on a twisting, winding spoor in and out of heavy bush through the heat, knowing that the twisting and winding meant that the big cats were annoyed at being pushed during the hot hours. At last, however, we came to what is called, in that portion of Botswana's Okavango swamps, a palm island, a hummock of perhaps four acres, covered with impenetrable doum palms. The lions' track went in, but it didn't come out. They were there, but there was no way to get at them. A man couldn't see past his rifle muzzle in those thickets.

Lionel decided that our only hope of holding the quartet in the area overnight, so that we could take the trail again with a full day's

light to work with, was to feed them. That decision sent us back to the car and careening through the bush, watching the sun sink and desperately looking for any kind of animal which lions like to eat and which I still had on my license. A small herd of wildebeest was spotted, and one of its members fell to my .416. Wildebeest are tough, and we wanted this one on the ground *now*.

The carcass was heaved into the hunting car and off we went, swaying and lurching in the soft sand, back to the palm island. A quick circle in the gathering dusk proved that the lions hadn't left their sanctuary, so we dumped the wildebeest, tied it to the rear bumper, slit open its belly, and dragged it around the island and away to a nearby thicket where we could hang the carcass in a tree. That job done, we mounted up and headed for camp in the deepening dusk.

As we passed the palm island, I was astonished to see the lion leave his thicket, padding intently along the drag-trail. We stopped to watch him, faced with the option of shooting and chancing losing him to the hyenas over night unless I could produce an instant kill, or having to trail him, wounded, next morning. We knew it was too dark to shoot, but it was not too dark to see the lion standing less than 50 yards away, staring arrogantly at the vehicle. After a few minutes, Lionel switched on the engine and we drove back to our safari camp, silent, each mind crowded with images, some of what we had seen and some of what we might see tomorrow. Perhaps only Lionel Palmer's images bore the tints of truth, for he is one of the world's most experienced hunters of the African lion.

The following day can be described quickly, but it did not pass quickly. At daybreak we found that the wildebeest carcass had been devoured, and that the pride had then retreated to their fortress in the palm island. It was not possible to enter the jungled island with any hope of getting a clear shot, even at close range, and it would have been near-suicidal to try. We could only wait and watch, occasionally circling the island to check for departing pug marks.

Finally, at midafternoon, we found them. The male had left his ladies and slipped out.

The line of tracks went steadily to the west, and we followed them until the sun was a blazing magenta ball behind the tallest palms. The tracking job done by Soaconga and John was beyond belief. They carried the track through soft ground and hard, high grass and layers of dead leaves, unerringly. I thought that, if I am ever a fugitive, I hope the Sheriff puts bloodhounds on my trail instead of that pair of relentless, inexorable men. I thought I'd have no chance at all against them, whereas I *might* elude the hounds.

As the sun sank, so did my heart. When we decided that it was too late to shoot, even if we caught the lion, I took it for granted that we'd lost him for good.

But Lionel and the trackers seemed unconcerned, even though we'd pushed the big cat at least five miles from his palm island and female companions. They were confident that he'd come back . . . and they were right. I awoke at 2:00 a.m. next morning and went outside the tent, and I could hear the old boy only a couple of miles away, grumbling and moaning and complaining as he padded through the starlit thickets. A couple of hours later, my wife was awake and heard the lion roaring "very close". Lionel reported that just before dawn he thought the pride might be heading for our camp, judging from the volume of lion noises.

We skipped breakfast and hurried to the arena, the area around the palm island and the wildebeest carcass, and there were the lion's tracks, only minutes old. He'd come back to get his girl friends, and we took up the trail once more.

We caught up with the lions at 10:00 a.m. They were lying in the shade around a dried-up waterhole. We ducked low and ran for the cover of a termite mound, but the lion spotted us before I could raise the rifle. Instantly, he was on his feet, bounding away, and once more the scene seemed to shift into slow motion as I struggled to get the crosshairs on his flowing form. Lionel had urged me to shoot at a lion running straight away, in contrast to everything I'd ever heard or read about dangerous game; and now, with no time to make a competent decision, I snapped off the shot. As the .416 bellowed and rammed back

against my shoulder, I heard a fateful sound . . . the angry grunt of an African lion with a bullet in him.

Cautious examination of the area, with Lionel and I standing sentry with rifles at high port, revealed a little blood. I'd hit the animal, but no one knew where or how hard.

It was a sober moment. A wounded lion is a serious matter, probably the world's most dangerous animal. In Lionel's eyes was the look of the gunfighter who has faced many opponents and survived, but who knows that sooner or later his luck must run out. He was wondering if his odds were up on this day. The trackers were impassive, not smiling. I was desperately afraid that Lionel wouldn't allow me to go with him to do what all of us knew had to be done. Very few safari clients are taken into the bush after a dangerous, wounded beast by professional hunters, and I was prepared to accept Lionel's decision. Suddenly, the Botswana sun felt cold on my shoulders.

At last Lionel said quietly, "Well, are you ready?", and my heart soared. I wasn't ready; nobody is ever ready to follow a crippled lion, but this was something I had to do.

So the climactic act in the saga began, with the four of us swinging off on the blood-spattered trail. The two trackers kept their eyes on the ground, followed by Lionel and me, rifles ready, scanning the thickets all around. There was no conversation. The bush was terribly thick and growing denser as we progressed, and the lion could charge at short range from any direction at any instant. When the bush closed in so that we had to pass no more than a single lion-bound from impenetrable cover, the unarmed trackers silently stepped aside and Lionel and I led the way, looking and listening, sweaty-palmed and knot-gutted. When the cover opened up a little, the trackers would take the lead again.

The day was windless and brutally hot, and the bush was still as a graveyard, as though all the forest world were holding its breath to watch.

Twice we found ourselves crossing our own tracks, which meant that the lions had been behind us. Once we heard a surly grunt ahead and froze, waiting for the roaring growl and the rhythmic "unh-unh-unh!" of a

charging lion. But there was no other sound, and we eased along the trail, one step at a time, to find where the animals had lain down. The trackers were unable to diagnose the lion's wound from the blood pattern, but we knew by now that my bullet hadn't gotten inside his body cavities, and that he was not disabled.

The hours passed. We had no water, and thirst was becoming almost as formidable a foe as the lion. Twice more we jumped the pride without the opportunity for a shot, knowing that the chances of drawing a charge multiplied each time we stumbled into the lions as they rested. We could not rest.

It was midafternoon when we finally got a break. We saw the lionesses, for once, before they saw us, and we tried frantically to make out the form of the lion, to no avail. But when they jumped up, growling, to run, we saw the three females go one way while the male went another. As though suddenly berserk, Lionel and the trackers broke into a headlong run, trying to get a shot in an open place in the bush. We didn't, but my companions kept on running, and I ran with them, confused and dazed with disappointment and fatigue. I didn't understand that they were running to position us between the lion and his lionesses. Now Lionel pointed at a giant strangler-fig tree and snapped a few words in the native language, and Soacongá grabbed my arm and steered me into the shade of the tree where we all stood with our backs to the trunk.

Then an astonishing thing occurred. John, the tracker, began to make a low, soft, crooning call, deep in his throat with his mouth closed. Almost at once, we heard the same sound repeated behind us, from the direction in which the lionesses had gone. It was the call which lions use to communicate with each other at short range, and John was actually trying to call the wounded lion to us.

We waited. It seemed that the whole world waited, hushed. There was no sound, no motion. Then, in the thickets in front of us, a francolin cackled and flushed, and Soacongá seized my arm and nodded wildly toward the sound.

And then the lion walked out of the bush, only 40 yards away, with his head up, looking

for his precious lionesses. I will die with that image grav'n on my mind: that great tawny cat limned against the golden grass, under the African sun!

He was not over 30 yards away when I raised the rifle, and he instantly saw the movement and turned to face us. As the cross-hairs wobbled across his chest, I was thinking that a lion can cover 100 yards from a standing start in about four-and-a-half seconds, and that at this range, if my first bullet failed to kill him there would be no time for a second. Lionel, who was waiting for me to shoot, would have one shot before the lion was upon us. I had trouble selecting the aiming point because, through the 1½X scope, I couldn't keep from looking into those great yellow eyes.

Finally the big rifle roared, and the lion answered with an ear-splitting roar of his own and went straight up in the air, turning and thrashing. Vaguely, I heard the blast of Lionel's .458 beside me, but the lion still didn't go down. But he didn't charge, either. Instead, he ran to our right, offering each of us two more shots at his broadside, and then he stumbled, swayed to one side, fell, struggled to rise, and finally sank motionless.

It was over. At last, after a lifetime of dreaming and three days of agony, I could kneel beside my lion and reach out and put my hand on him, feel the velvet hide over those fearful muscles, and touch the mane. It was done, reverently, while Lionel—as cotton-mouthed and shaken as I—murmured, "He is Africa, isn't he?"

My bullet had gone straight through his heart. Near the wound, we found a lump in the chest muscles, and cut out of it an ancient .450 Martini-Henry slug which had been there long enough to become completely encapsulated. I still have it, and it makes me wonder about the man who fired it, and whether it was the reason the lion chose not to charge when he had so many opportunities. Perhaps the native who made so bold as to fire his feeble, homemade bullet into the chest of this lion was responsible for the fact that the gunfighter's look was gone from Lionel Palmer's eyes, and for the fact that the sun was hot again and the bush buzzing with life.

