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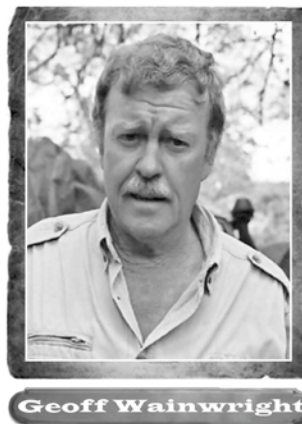
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- Cover: A mammoth brace of boxlock-actioned double rifles chambered for the .700 Nitro-Express cartridge, made by J&L Wilkins from England. From the collection of Bill Jones.
- Cover photograph: Hank Spencer, Image Arts
- Cover design: Thea Venter
- Contents photo: Pieter du Plessis





# GRAVEYARD *Lion*

*I grew up in Zambia and as a young man I was employed by Zambia Safaris as a professional hunter. We had just arrived in the Luangwa Valley en route to my hunting camp, Nyampala. My client was an American. As his name was not legible on the water-ruined page of my 1974 diary, I will call him Grant.*

It was mid-afternoon and my Land Cruiser was overloaded with heavy drums of fuel. The vehicle was parked on the Chibindi pontoon and had a view over the river to the opposite bank. Grant, who was much older than me, was seated in the cab next to me, his camera focused on a pod of hippo not more than 50 yards away. Two men, using club-like handles with slots cut into them, pulled on the cable and the pontoon moved away from the bank. On board I recognised the witch doctor from the village of Nabwala, from where all my camp staff had been recruited. Much feared, he had an evil aura about him. His teeth were filed to sharp points.

We greeted each other in Chewa, the local language. He enquired if my wife Gillie was in my camp. When I replied in the affirmative, he shook his head and spat into the river. Gillie, a hard worker, was a highly qualified nurse. While I hunted with our clients, she helped in the government clinic. When it was overcrowded, she even worked outside below the mango trees. Her presence and popularity undermined his authority and he resented it. Word even had it that he had put a curse on us.

His words had hardly left his lips, when the pontoon suddenly began to list. One side rose higher and higher. My imagination ran wild that a hippo had surfaced underneath us and was about to turn the rig over! Panic set in and there was no time to grab our rifles. Water suddenly gushed around the tyres and the truck lay at a precarious angle. Grant and I scrambled out and clung to the cable with one hand. The other, in vice-like grips, grabbed onto the vehicle to try and stop it from sliding off the pontoon! But we lacked

the strength to hold on. While we watched in horror, my Land Cruiser slid off and sunk below the surface! The pontoon then righted itself. Luckily, the truck came to rest with its four wheels on the river bed. Only the roof of the cab was visible above the water. The hippo pod ignored the mayhem. They simply cavorted, honked and snorted loudly. All our legal documentation and supplies for a 21-day hunt were on board.

We stripped down to our underpants and jumped in. The water was murky and the visibility down to a few inches. I swam into the cab, felt my way around and rescued our rifles and ammunition. Grant salvaged his duffel bag, food, and of course his whiskey and a case of beers. After we had placed everything on board, we clambered back onto the pontoon. The crew finally pulled the rig to the opposite bank. Relieved that the drama was over, and with bare feet dangling in the water, we each took a swig of neat whisky, broke the tension and then burst into laughter.

My camp was a full day's hard footslog away and we were desperate for help. The witch doctor approached us and said, "Your wife is not welcome in our village and beware of the hyenas!" He then turned his back and hurried away. Witchcraft played a powerful role among the susceptible and superstitious villagers. But we scoffed at his comment and cleaned our rifles. Night fell and later we ate our supper out of tin cans. Camped next to the crew's hut, we caught snatches of sleep and took turns to fuel the fire.

Later on there was a loud rustling. At first, one hyena appeared, eyes shining like pearls. It was followed by a pack. We watched as they skulked into view, their dark bodies

silhouetted against the grey light of the night. The quiet of the camp was suddenly shattered as they whooped, giggled and made a terrifying din. The pontoon crew, afraid for our well-being, called from inside their hut, "Come inside!"

Suddenly the village drums began to beat – a message had been received. There was a sudden eerie silence that was broken a few moments later by the soft thump of hyena paws over the ground. Thankfully the pack vanished into the night. The hairs on the back of my neck rose. Then, all seemed quiet – even the river seemed to have ceased to flow. We dozed fitfully, nerves on edge, and were thankful when daylight arrived.

The morning was slow with peace and the sun grew hotter. I glassed and saw two log-like crocodiles basking on a sandbank. A pod of hippo wallowed in the background. We checked our .375s. Mine was an old, well-worn and precious Holland & Holland. Grant had a brand-new Winchester. We strapped our ammunition belts on and left the rig. Grant followed me on a worn elephant and hippo path littered with dung. Later we checked the wind, crawled to the edge of the bank and peered over. The crocs had not moved. The dark male was easily distinguishable from its mate; he had a thicker and heavier, horny head and powerful jaws. His narrow-jawed mate lay to one side. Peter followed my instructions and fired twice into the male's neck. The soft-points severed his spine. The female took fright, scrambled up and at a fast, high-bellied waddle, launched herself into the river and vanished below the surface.

We scrambled down the bank and were soon joined by the pontoon crew. Water up to our knees, we towed the crocodile through the shallows to the pontoon. Gillie arrived in my second Land Cruiser with apprentice hunter Arthur Taylor at the wheel. My hunting crew consisting of White, Labkin and Wireless were on the back. They had waited for us in camp and then finally had gone to sleep. When dawn came, they had set out to search for us. We chatted jovially and got down to work. Two winch cables were hooked together and we pulled my Land Cruiser onto dry land. The crocodile was wrestled on board the good Cruiser. The Land Cruiser's batteries were switched and then Arthur and Labkin left us to take Grant hunting. With Gillie, White and the pontoon crew in my ranks, we toiled long and hard on my truck. We heard two rifle shots in the distance. Grant's safari was back on track and we smiled.

By late evening we had drained all the fluids and replaced the fuel, but there was still a lot to do and we built a bonfire. By the light of the flames, we all worked hard through the night. Just before dawn, and after lions had roared across the river, I turned the ignition key. The engine laboured twice, coughed, then burst into life. We scrambled on board, thanked the pontoon crew and drove away. By nightfall my vehicle rounded the tight corner of a combretum thicket. Its lights lit up my thatched camp, silvered in moonlight, with a view over the oxbow lagoon. I slowed down and parked below a sausage tree (*Kigelia africana*) that leaned over the *chitenge* (the Chewa word for an open-walled dining room). Hurricane lamps cast a soft glow over the table and we joined Grant and Arthur for supper.

Their conversation was spiced by the exciting drama of a rhino charge. The bad-tempered bull had chased them away from a zebra kill. Their knees and elbows were badly grazed from climbing trees to get out of harm's way. Little did we realise at the time that this rare experience would be branded into their memories. The last remaining black rhino in the Luangwa was poached in 1992. We all slept well that night. Before dawn and after breakfast, our hunting party left camp.

When it was light enough to see, Gillie did her rounds and checked on Grant's trophies. The crocodile's body looked sinister with the hide removed and she shuddered. She watched as the skin-



The Land Cruiser is rescued from the river by apprentice hunter Arthur Taylor and a friend.



The author with his first wife Gillie and the graveyard lion



A vehicle crossing at the Chibindi pontoon, Zambia

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ner slit open its stomach, took the contents out and spread them over the ground. There was a duiker head, complete with horns, animal hooves, warthog tusks, bones, sticks and stones. The breeze shifted and the foul stench of gastric juices – so powerful that they dissolved almost anything – smacked into their nostrils. The skinner smiled and scraped up the acidic liquid into a jar. This would later be sold to witch doctors as *muti* (medicine). Gill just shook her head in disbelief at the thought of their primitive beliefs. She was about to turn away when the skinner handed her a steel bangle covered in muck.

She scrubbed it clean and examined it. It did not fit in the traditional African style of jewellery worn by the village people. There was a hallmark stamp on the inside and it seemed to have been imported from Europe. We later returned from a successful day's hunt, my Land Cruiser weighed down with Grant's trophy eland! That night, as we sat round the campfire, the bangle was passed around. Gillie, deep in thought, remarked, "If only it could talk!" We sipped our beers, had supper and later retired for the night.

The next day, while Gillie was alone in camp, a messenger arrived. A baby in his village had slipped off her mother's back and fallen into a cooking fire. Gillie wasted no time. She loaded his bicycle and her medical kit on board the Land Cruiser. They left camp, chased by a cloud of dust, and finally arrived at a grubby collection of huts. Dogs barked and the screaming baby was brought to her by its frantic mother. While she attended to the child's burns, pestered by flies, a gummy old hag of a woman pointed at the bangle now on Gillie's wrist. She recognised it and said that it had at one time belonged to her deceased daughter! She also claimed that there were two parts to the pretty piece. She asked where the other part was.

The whole set had been a gift from a tourist to her daughter who had treasured it and never took them off. Her sick daughter, she claimed, had left the village for medical treatment. While being treated by the witch doctor, she had gone missing. Days later, after an extensive search, her body was found by a fisherman, floating in the Luangwa River. One arm was missing! Tradition required that after any villager had been killed by a crocodile (the host of their darkest fears), the witch doctor had to perform a secret ritual. With incoherent babbling and eyes fixed trance-like, he rid her body of the evil spirits of the "killer". Then, helped only by his assistant, they buried her in a blanket. Gillie took the mother and the village headman as witnesses and returned to camp. They confirmed, together with my skinner, that only one part of the bangle had been found in the crocodile's stomach.

In the half-light of late afternoon, we returned and parked alongside the *chitenge*. Bodies aching with fatigue, we clambered out. Grant had shot an elephant and left the tusks in the skull to rot out. We toasted his success and partied late into the night. The next morning, we left camp with high hopes of getting a shot at a lion as it fed off the carcass.

En route we found fresh buffalo tracks, saw a herd of impala and later stopped on the bank of a dry river bed. Labkin jumped down and White handed our rifles to Arthur. Wire-less took the lead. As we walked, the soft sand crunched under our boots. We later checked the wind, crouched low, stalked forward and hid behind a wall of flood debris. I glassed upstream at the elephant carcass. Vultures were

perched in the trees – a sure indication that a cat was in the vicinity.

Grant and I retrieved our rifles. Our crew were instructed to remain behind. We climbed the bank and made a detour round the feathered scavengers. Ever so slowly, we approached the carcass from behind. Careful not to disturb the vultures, lest they betray our presence, we looked down into the river bed. We saw a large, bloody hole in the elephant's hindquarters. In the sand, fresh lion pug marks led upstream. We regrouped and took up the spoor. They were easy to follow and we made good progress. Labkin suddenly stopped us, his face ashen. He pointed to the riverbank where the sand had been washed away ... Sticking out of the wall, was a human skull and some sun-bleached bones! It was an evil omen. It had power over the minds of my staff and they muttered in low tones.

I followed the lion tracks up an old hippo furrow. Cautiously I peered over the top and the village cemetery came into view. There was a solemn air about it. It had a few broken crosses that marked the burial mounds. I turned round to beckon my crew. They had all vanished – their strong belief in evil spirits had claimed their minds. Only Pete and Arthur remained. Careful not to disturb anything, we gently and quietly followed the lion tracks between the weed-covered graves. Placed on some of the mounds were rusted tin pots, holes punched through the bottoms. Others had broken pottery.

We passed a small mound where a baby had been buried. A shoe and rubber dummy had been placed on top. Carrying on at a slow pace, we felt a haunting feeling in our bones, as if the dead watched our every move. Arthur suddenly clicked his fingers, and we sank onto our haunches. Glasses raised, I saw a tawny body. The lion lay camouflaged below a shady tree, its belly bloated with elephant meat. Without any warning, Grant shot freehand. Our ears rang from the blast. The lion gave a deep-throated growl and sprang away in a tawny flash to vanish among the bush-covered graves.

We discussed his shot placement. "It was good!" Grant insisted, "My bullet hit its chest!" We all stood in silence and listened, then heard a drawn-out series of slow, moaning, prolonged, cough-like grunts as the lion's life slowly ebbed away. Rifles held at the ready and nerves on edge, we cautiously followed the pink, aerated blood. We found the lion lying dead in majestic silence on top of a grave!

There was a haunting-like whisper as the leaves on the trees rustled, trying to tell us something. We listened spell-bound and Grant's emotions set in. He was happy for the hunt yet sad for causing the demise of the lion. The customary handshakes then did the rounds. The truck was driven up the dry river bed. My solemn-faced staff returned. They insisted we hurry and we loaded the lion and returned to camp.

Years later, after Gillie and I had left the valley, it was rumoured that the grave on which Grant's lion had died, was that of the old lady's daughter. The witch doctor, who had died a few days later, was accused of poisoning her. The second part of her bangle was found secreted away in his hut.

*Due to a printer's error, one page of this article was omitted in the Nov/Dec 2016 issue. We therefore decided to reprint it. We apologise for any inconvenience this may have caused.*



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