

BOOK FOUR IN THE RAIDING FORCES SERIES

ROMAN CANDLE



PHIL WARD

1

DON'T GET BIT

“THE MOST IMPORTANT THING TO REMEMBER ABOUT TRACKING A wounded lion is don’t walk right up to it and get yourself bit,” Mr. Waldo Treywick said as he and Maj. John Randal, DSO, MC, stood looking at the four blood trails leading off into the bush.

The spoor had been left by four man-eating lions wounded the night before when the two of them had sat up in a small boma, using themselves as bait. Fourteen man-eaters had been put down from one pride, which must have been some kind of record.

Now Major Randal had to follow-up the injured big cats and kill them. The reason for hunting the lion had been to curry favor with the local villagers in order to win recruits for the guerrilla army that he had parachuted into Abyssinia to raise. Force N was not going to win any hearts and minds—or gain any recruits—if he left four wounded man-eaters on the loose in the neighborhood looking for payback.

“ ‘Cause if you do get munched on you’re pretty much as good as dead,” Waldo rattled on.

Waldo Treywick had been held captive by a bandit Ras for five years until Major Randal shot the shifta chief and freed the old man and two slave girls nicknamed Rita Hayworth and Lana Turner. Waldo had only the two girls to speak English with for his entire captivity. The girls understood the language perfectly but stubbornly refused to speak it, so for five years all his conversations in English had been one way. Now that he had been “emancipated,” Waldo had not stopped yapping, accustomed as he was to all of his conversations being one-way.

“We’ll just skip on past the details, Major, about how a lion likes to bite their prey on the back of the neck and the throat simultaneously... killin’ it more or less instantly by breakin’ its neck or smotherin’ it, though there ain’t no absolute guarantees on that. As you may recall, I have already done pointed out that sometimes you get drug off and ate alive.”

“Roger,” Major Randal said. “How could I forget?”

“The most important thing about huntin’ big cat is don’t get scratched neither—like you already done did. Now I ain’t brought it up before, not wantin’ to be insensitive to your injured condition, Major, but out here in the bush if a man gets clawed he nearly always dies because the wounds generally always turn septic. In your case, you’re either a fast healer or that Zar Cult mumbo-jumbo Rita and Lana performed done did the trick on you, ’cause your wounds ain’t infected. Except’n for that nasty-looking scar runnin’ down your face, you’re almost as good as new.

“I’ll go ahead and explain how she works if you do get clawed by a man-eater so you’ll know what it is you’re dealin’ with. Then you can make real sure not to let it happen—again.”

“Go ahead,” Major Randal said. “Run it down.”

“The thing is, lion’s claws—and leopard’s too, is all hollow inside. Man-eatin’ cats kill and eat people with ’em and when they do, little pieces of human meat gets trapped inside the hollow part. So what happens is the next time they swat somebody, the putrid meat particles trapped inside the claw gets into the scratch, it turns septic, gangrene sets in, the swat-ee gets real sick and dies a horrible death—ain’t real pretty.”

“I see,” Major Randal said, wondering what the chances were Waldo might run out of steam or die of old age so he could get on with tracking down the four wounded lions.

“Make sure you don’t get yourself bit or clawed any more than you have to a’ followin’ up those bad boys. You ever tracked anythin’, Major—somethin’ that might bite you at the end of the trail?”

“Huks.”

“Well, there you go,” Waldo said in a failed attempt to sound cheerful. “Here’s how I think we ought to handle this. You tackle the first one a’ followin’ up one of these here blood trails and we’ll see how you do.

“After that I think maybe it might be a good idea to send out parties of native trackers to scout up the other three. We can save a lot of time that a’ way. The trackers can signal us when they have a big cat run to ground. We’ll ride up easy on our mules, then you can dismount, wade in and bust it. Or maybe we’ll try to run the lion out into the open with beaters where we can shoot it at long range.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“OK, but the locals kind of need to see you kill one on your own first, Major.”

“Let’s do it.”

“I ain’t goin’ to be able to go in with you all the way on this safari. I’m too crippled up and would probably only get in the way. You need to be nimble fightin’ cat up close. Lana and Rita will serve as your gun bearers. They’re real good at it. I trained ’em myself. When we ride up, one of the girls and I’ll stay back to hold the animals while you and the other girl move in and make the kill.”

“Sir, I want to go with you,” Bimbashi Butch Hoolihan said eagerly.

“Negative,” Major Randal said. “You’re my troop commander. Your mission is to get on with recruiting. Go through the same drill, sort out the rifles and ammunition, keeping only the weapons that fire Italian Army-issue rounds—pick your men.”

“Sir, I would really like to come.”

“Butch, number one priority is to raise an army. So far you only have two men. We’ve got a long way to go. Wrap up your recruiting in a hurry. I plan to pull out right after we deal with these lions. No reason to hang around and give the Italians a sitting target.”

“Yes, sir,” Bimbashi Hoolihan said. “Not bloody fair you get to have all the fun.”

“You’ll get a crack at a lion, Butch. Just not today.”

There are few endeavors more dangerous than tracking a wounded man-eating lion. Following-up a wounded big cat with a voracious appetite is not a sport recommended for the faint of heart or weak of spirit, a vivid imagination being a handicap.

The ability to shoot fast and straight is a plus.

“Once a hunter goes in after a wounded man-eatin’ cat,” Waldo said, sounding like he was having second thoughts about the wisdom of the morning’s endeavor, “the most important thing to remember is only one of you is goin’ to come out alive.

“Now Major, the minute you set out on the trail a’ huntin’ this here lion, the cat is already huntin’ you. Don’t never forget that.”

“I understand, Mr. Treywick.”

“Don’t forget your Big Cat Down, Shoot Again Procedure. In fact, you keep workin’ the bolt and trigger on that slicked-up Springfield till it runs dry. Then just stick out your hand and the other one will be in it quick because Rita or Lana will be right there to hand it to ya’. I trained both girls and they’re reliable.”

“Good luck, sir,” Bimbashi Butch Hoolihan called, sounding about as worried as a Royal Marine is ever going to sound in public.

Maj. John Randal moved out on foot.

A whole crowd of locals was on hand to see him off. The villagers hoped to tag along, hang back and watch the show from a nice, safe distance. Having been preyed upon by these man-eaters, the villagers wanted to see them dead. The Force N interpreter, Kaldi, was under orders to keep the spectators well back.

The blood trail was easy to follow and led straight for a patch of thorn bush half a mile distant. The grass in the open savanna was almost waist high, making it necessary for Major Randal to move slowly and carefully with the M-1903 A-1 Springfield at the ready. The cat could be lying in wait, hidden anywhere in the long grass. Or it could have button-hooked back to attack from a rear quarter, one of an African lion’s favorite tactics. Waldo had covered this trick in his series of endless ruminations on the

subject of hunting the big cats.

Sitting on his mule a few yards back, Waldo called out a reminder, "By the time you spot the cat, the kitty will have been watchin' you, Major. From the second the lion senses you in the bush he's goin' to have a plan and he's already workin' at executin' it while you're still on the scout."

Major Randal ignored him, concentrating on the spoor. Right at his heels was his gun bearer, Lana Turner, recognizable by the Royal Marine insignia on her multi-colored turban. He had given her the badge as an identifier because it was so difficult to tell the two girls apart. She was like his shadow, floating along silently everywhere he moved, never getting in the way.

In the Philippine Islands during his tour with the U.S. 26th Cavalry Regiment, Major Randal had spent two years operating against the elusive Huk guerrillas. He noted that the experience of following up the lion felt not much different from tracking a wounded Huk who would kill you at the end of the trail if he could. With the lion there was the added primal element of knowing that what he was trailing wanted to eat him.

A Huk would not do that.

The spoor was not hard to follow. Cats are known for being soft-footed, but this lion weighed between 400 and 500 pounds. It left unmistakable pugmarks that were plain to see for anyone who knew the rudiments of tracking.

The lion had been shot, but how severely hit was impossible to tell. The bullet wound was leaving a trail of blood, though there was not a great deal of it. The widely dispersed reddish brown splotches were there to be followed, provided of course that the tracker knew how to read spoor.

From time to time, Major Randal lost the blood trail; at that point he would simply stop and move in a half circle in the direction of march, casting until he cut the sign again. The wounded cat had bounded away from the boma the night before, leaving a lot of signs with its giant strides. A skilled African hand could have told a detailed story from reading the clues.

No doubt if Mr. Treywick had been doing the tracking he would have been able to tell the cat's height, weight, age, sex and IQ from the spoor, but Major Randal only knew that the sign pointed him in the general direction the wounded lion had taken. There was, however, no guarantee. The man-eater might have curled back in the grass to ambush his back trail. In that case, knowing the animal's original line of flight could provide a false sense of security.

Major Randal reminded himself not to forget that the cat was likely aware of his presence by sight, sound, smell, or all three. The man-eater already had a plan to kill him and was working out the details of how best to put it into action. He moved slowly, edging his way carefully forward using the method known as still hunting, taking his time, letting his eyes scan the brush looking for anything, for everything, but especially something out of place—a color, a shape, the flicker of an ear or the ripple of a tail.

Progress was steady but painstakingly slow—sweeping the brush with his eyes trying to see through and behind it, peering inside the brush line letting his eyes adjust, but working them hard. Major Randal had better-than-perfect eyesight and his peripheral range was extraordinary. Today he could have used X-ray vision.

Following up the lion was as spooky as anything he had ever done. He was hunting the man-eater, but he knew the man-eater was hunting him too. There was the unmistakable feeling the animal was studying him right this very second, licking its lips. Major Randal was clicked on.

There was no sign of the lion, only the occasional brown blood splotches and the pugmarks. Up ahead the grass thinned, and the visibility improved marginally. He could not see anything but thorn bushes and intermittent tufts of savanna grass. Inside the bush line the grass thinned out, and the dirt was packed.

Lana Turner had closed up tight, brushing against him with the spare M-1903 A-1 Springfield rifle ready to trade off. She also had his 12-gauge Browning A-5 slung over one shoulder for close work. Walking up on this lion felt like a really stupid thing to be doing. Major Randal wondered what Lady Jane was doing right this minute. He thought about being the Blue Plate Special.

The lion exploded from a clump of grass that would not have concealed a quail, streaking for him like a flaming arrow. The speed with which the big cat covered the ground was incredible. All Major Randal saw was a tawny yellow flash; then the M-1903 A-1 Springfield was to his shoulder, his finger was curled around the two-stage military trigger taking up the slack in its first stage, the post front sight centered rock solid under the raging man-eater's gigantic incisors through the Marine No. 6 aperture sight, and the weapon boomed—only he had no memory of causing any of those things.

The man-eater and Major Randal locked eyeball to eyeball as he cycled the bolt. Too late he remembered you are not supposed make eye contact with a lion; it infuriates them. The rifle quickly banged three more times.

Dead from the first shot, the lion kept charging. Major Randal continued to fire even after the animal plowed into the ground chin-first, piling up three feet from where he was standing. The M-1903 A-1 Springfield rifle boomed once more as if it had a mind of its own, then his spare rifle was in his hands. Lana was inserting a stripper clip into the empty weapon, and he could hear her racking the glass-smooth bolt to chamber a .30 caliber round.

She was very good.

All in all, the event was similar to a dream sequence. It felt as if he were having an out-of-body experience, looking down on the drama unfolding from a height of about fifteen feet. Major Randal was familiar with the sensation, having experienced it in combat before.

From the beginning to the end of the attack—which had taken less than three seconds—he had not made one conscious decision. Like most life and death encounters, the fight was over quick. Every action had been automatic.

Then Waldo and Rita Hayworth arrived with a host of jubilant natives swarming around. The death of a man-eating lion was always a happy occasion.

While studying the dead cat, Major Randal lit one of his few remaining Player's cigarettes with his battered 26th Cavalry Regiment Zippo.

“Nice goin’, Major,” Waldo praised as he rode up on his mule. “Standin’ your ground with a man-eater comin’ for you ain’t for everyone. You sure followed your BCDSAP right quick, like I taught you. That Springfield was really talkin’. Lions come at you fast, don’t they?”

“What’s the chances one or two of those other cats we winged last night might already be dead by now, Mr. Treywick?”

“We can always hope, Major. Optimism is a good thing to have in the man-eater huntin’ business. Lion in the wild, especially those that has been makin’ a livin’ eatin’ people on a daily basis, ain’t the loveable furry creatures they make ’em out to be in the movies, is they?”

“Noticed the macabre detail that differentiates your man-eater from your regular run-of-the-mill lions yet, have you?”

“Negative,” Major Randal said, confident that Waldo was going to point it out for him.

“Human meat is marbled meat with a high fat content. Man-eaters is plump and sleek. Look like contented show kitties—only there ain’t no such thing as a contented man-eatin’ African lion.”

“Warm and cuddly as a Nazi SS-storm trooper.”

“Well you’re the man wanted to be a lion killer. You ready to start lookin’ for a less adventurous line of work, Major?”

“Not until Hoolihan has all his soldiers recruited.”

“In that case, if I was you I’d advise Butch not to be so choosy a’ pickin’ his men.”

The villagers closed up on the kill. They were fired up with enthusiasm to go after the three remaining lions now that they had seen one put down. Militarily, Maj. John Randal noted this might be a good sign, an indication that—if well led—the men might fight. The natives were eager to set out.

First off, Waldo relieved every man of his rifle. The men were not supposed to shoot at the cats. Besides, the natives had more confidence in their ability with their spears. But they were not expected to spear them either. Their job was to follow up the blood trails and signal when they had a lion at bay.

“The last place you’d ever want to be is anywhere in the area when these boys is armed with loaded firearms and facing a mad cat,” Waldo explained. “They’re likely to bust a cap on anythin’ that moves, but the only thing they’re goin’ to hit is what they *ain’t* aimin’ at. You got enough problems, Major, without havin’ to dodge friendly fire.”

The plan was for Major Randal and his entourage to rest easy in the shade of an acacia tree and wait for developments. Three parties of spearmen were dispatched to track down the blood trails of each of the remaining wounded lions. When any of the three groups of trackers felt like they had the lion cornered, they were to dispatch a runner to guide Major Randal to the scene; he would then ride up, dismount, go in and finish off the wounded animal.

The idea was to get the villagers involved with saving themselves and at the same time help Waldo identify any native who demonstrated ability as a tracker so he could be recruited for later field work. And, Major Randal got a respite from the high stress inherent in following up killer cats.

Major Randal reclined under the acacia, smoking a cigarette. Rita and Lana were nearby twittering like canaries. Waldo sat easy in the saddle of his mule. A group of villagers were squatting under other trees observing the events.

A native dashed up, shouting excitedly. The old elephant poacher called, “Mount up, they done got one run to ground!”

Parachute, the big white mule, shied away when Major Randal attempted to step aboard. He must have sensed the excitement. The mule picked the wrong time to get temperamental. Major Randal took two running steps, vaulted into the saddle and once aboard, kicked the animal hard in the ribs to get his attention. The native messenger took off at a dead run. Parachute gave a couple of little crow hops before coming around on a tight rein and loped after him.

Waldo and the two girls were hard after the white mule. Rita was toting Major Randal’s spare rifle and shotgun and would be serving as his gun bearer on the second stalk. Lana would dismount and hold the mules while Waldo stayed in the saddle with his 8mm Steyr-Mannlicher ready, providing backup and rear security in the event the cat circled back.

The riders trotted through the bush following the native guide until Major Randal spotted a small clutch of natives gesturing wildly with their spears for them to hurry. He had the United States Marine model M-1903 A-1 Springfield with the No. 6 aperture sight in one hand with the steel butt resting on his right thigh.

As he rode up to the small group of natives, the lion exploded out of the thick cover, leapt at Major Randal, missed, sailed over the back of Parachute and locked onto the rear haunch of Waldo's mule with all four claws. The natives screamed and scattered.

Parachute was not of the temperament to appreciate this development. In the blink of an eye, the mule leapt high into the air, fish-hooked and let fly with both heels a vicious kick at the man-eating lion, catching it flush on the ribcage. The ferocious cat was knocked loose from Waldo's braying mule.

But Parachute's unexpected move pitched Major Randal over his head and sent his rifle flying.

The snarling lion and Major Randal slammed into the ground at about the same time, separated by only 10 yards. The Raiding Forces officer hit so hard he bounced. The fall really hurt, and for the second time in his short career as a lion hunter he was facing an enraged man-eater at close range with no rifle. By the time he rolled over, struggling desperately to get back in the fight, Rita was right there kneeling beside him. She handed him his .12-gauge Browning A-5 in time for him to pump three rounds rapid-fire into the angry cat from the prone position. Waldo managed to get his mule under control enough to get off one shot before the natives swarmed in with their spears to finish the monster off.

"I musta' forgot to warn you—the most important thing to remember about mounted lion huntin' is to make real sure you don't ride your mule up too close to where they got the lion bayed," Waldo commented after the situation was under control.

"Things get real excitin' real fast if you do."

Major Randal was kneeling head down on the ground, spitting out dirt, battered from the fall, and hurting all over. The scratches on his chest from his first encounter with a lion had fired up, the pain glowing like neon lights and the stitches in the long wound on his face were throbbing.

The Force N commander had heard enough of Mr. Waldo Treywick's lion hunting commentary for one day. And he still had two more wounded cats to deal with. Lion hunting may be the sport of kings, but it is not without its vicissitudes.

On the plus side, he was beginning to grow attached to Rita Hayworth and Lana Turner, which was a good thing, since technically, by Abyssinian rules, he owned them.