

SHADOWS OF THE FOREST

Somewhere in woodland, a gnarled old umtshibi spreads aloft towards the southern cross, its tangled evergreen canopy twinkling to the light of a half moon. In contrast, its more numerous companions were quickly shedding their teak dress of late autumn leaves, their thinning glory of gold hidden until the break of day. The ground was now strewn with a thick carpet of crisp leaf and litter, a seasonal mulch to boost the meagre fertility of the hungry ancient Kalahari sand.

Beneath the tree the camp fire flared to momentarily reflect the white human faces, gathered like ghosts, relaxing in its cast on the comforting earth. Our meal was finished and with water precious, the clinging remnants of sadza and kapenta had been cut from the plates with sand and polished to a gleam with dry grass.

The mild evening temperature was pleasant for a June night and the place installed a feeling of contentment - a sense of peace, solitude and freedom. We spoke of earthly things, of evolution and of wildlife and its survival - the place each species rightfully has on this earth until natural struggle and conflict between them determines their niche or failure; how only Man's concern and wisdom can give some hope and fairness to their fate. The night with its unknown shadows, its apparitions of uncertainty and fantasy, was keenly silent but not eerie. We felt a powerful affinity with the profound touch of nature.

Meanwhile in the background the cold, unfeeling metallic signal went on, precise, state-of-the-art technology – *beep - beep - beep - beep*.

The discussion now had an Oxford accent, a doctorate, of papers and presentations - all ingrained with the credibility of nine long years of difficult and dedicated wildlife field research.

Sssh, Listen! The questions were terminated with an abruptance - a forgiving finality that we had become use to. Unknown to us one of the most moving experiences of our lives was about to unfold.

The silence was intense. To breathe was an effort.

The sudden disturbance of dry leaves, curled and tarnished by an unforgiving sun, was exaggerated by the acuteness of our senses. Adrenaline made it deafening.

*Patter patter, patter patter.....*The pattern was familiar to those who love animals. The large elongated paws, designed by evolution for sustainability and running down prey to unquestionably fulfil the essential needs of life, began circling us unseen.

There was scuffling as animals came together - perhaps in play - then continued with reconnoitre. They became bolder, inquisitive, shortening the distance to metres between us. Our eyes strained hard to gather in the struggling light of the moon, to put shape and feeling to the concealing shadows of the night. They circled us again.

Suddenly they were there - lean, hungry ghost-like shapes in the moonlight with Mickey Mouse ears; wearing their dappled coats of black, tan and gold, like ink spots on blotting paper. Only a new day would reveal their full wild beauty. Only Man, the cause of their endangerment, could hope to prevent their extinction.

They passed us by in single file, silently except for the rustle of leaves beneath restless paws. They were famished with purpose and responsibility for their species and would hunt again tonight as they have done for aeons. We would not interfere. Humbly we were here but only on their terms to seek information for their survival.

One stopped with dignified stare to look at us, alert, head aloof. It gave an apprehensive half cough half growl as if to ask,

'Who are you - What are you doing here?'

The painted dogs then melted into the African night like phantoms as quietly as they had come.

This was one of many marvellous incidents we have experienced with the painted dog while camping in teak and mopane woodland on the edge of Hwange National Park, Zimbabwe with Greg Rasmussen, Director of Painted Hunting Dog Research, during numerous trips to Africa. We were carrying out a daily research routine with Greg and were biding time before following the Hlangabeza pack of eight dogs on an expected moonlight hunt. They had denned in thick timber no more than 200 metres from where we sat. Simon the beta male was fitted with a radio collar which was transmitting signals (beeps) back to the earphones of our radio directional antennae. We followed them for nine kilometres on the hunt, plotting their course with the aid of the telemetry gear until they quickly killed and totally consumed a grey duiker. We returned to sleep on the grey sand under the umtshibi tree listening to their excited, un-doglike twitterings as they regurgitated and fed the lactating alpha female and pups behind the protective screen of bush.

The pack visited us again at dawn the next day before moving off on the morning hunt. We sat together humbled and enchanted by their inquisitiveness and acceptance. It was both a memorable and moving experience and became a strong influence towards eventually devoting all my time to drawing wildlife after 43 years on the land.