

# George Adamson: Lord of the Lions

*Sandy Gall*



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## *Chapter Twelve*

# AT MERU

George had two ways of dealing with Joy's intemperate outbursts. In public, being a perfect gentleman, he would say nothing and blandly turn the other cheek. In private, occasionally at any rate, he might remonstrate more forcefully. But he had a third defence, which in the earlier days of his marriage he used to good effect. He loved practical jokes and who better to play them on than the irascible and in some ways gullible Joy. According to Jonny Baxendale, Joy was frightened of only two things: punctures and elephants.

'She just couldn't change a tyre, so she was petrified of having punctures. She always had to have someone in the car with her everywhere she went just in case she had a puncture. And the other thing she was frightened of, amazingly, was elephants. So George and I had this little technique; Joy wants to come round at the weekend and we really can't be bothered to put up with all the hassle, all the screaming and shouting. I used to leave camp when Joy arrived generally, because I knew she would scream and shout at George. George could take it but I couldn't, so I would just go for a walk with the lions or something, we'd go up on to the hill. So we'd convince Joy, George chuckling away on his pipe: "Just tell Joy that there's a lot of elephants on the road, and of course if there're elephants on the road they're always pulling thorns across the road and she'll end up getting lots of punctures." The combination of the two guaranteed that Joy would never turn up. She had to go round the long way and she'd always say, "Are there still lots of elephant there?" and I'd say, "Well Joy, they're thinning out a bit; it's not too bad but we'll let you know."

'The only thing Joy said that I reckon was very correct about George was that he drove like a rhino. George would light his pipe and he would go along in top gear, with the thing juddering, hit every hole, boom, boom, boom! Joy would say, "George! Stop the car, stop the car! You're driving like a rhino!" She had a neck problem; she wore a collar. "I can't take it! Jonny! George, get out, get in the back. Jonny's going to drive." And George would. "Yes, alright."

'George liked to keep a record of what the lions were doing and this was the major part of his diary. So I used to stand in the back of the pick-up and I'd be looking around for the lions, and very often they would hear the car come up, and George would be in there with his pipe, driving. On many occasions – I can remember three occasions – we'd be going along and I'd suddenly hear "pff, pff, pff, pffoo" behind





*Rhino starting a  
charge on  
George's  
Land-Rover*



*Head down before  
impact*



*After impact:  
honour satisfied*

me and I'd turn around. The first time I thought it was a puncture, the tyre going. I turned round and there was a damn rhino behind us. So I'd lean over and say: "George! Go! Rhino! We're being chased by a rhino, go like hell." "Oh!" he says, and he stops! He puts his brakes on, Bang! Crash! and then the rhino would run off. And that was one of the rhinos. And George said, "God, that was a rhino. Why did you tell me to stop?" "George, I said go like hell; we've a rhino after us." So we go off again. And you know it happened three times and every time George stopped. On two occasions we got hit, really hit; on one occasion it was two rhinos so we got a double-barrelled session, and then on the third occasion we didn't get hit at all. Finally, I said, "George, I promise you if we get a rhino after us next time I'm not going to say anything because it's better if you just keep going than stop." Because you know he was a bit deaf, especially when he was driving. I used to lean over and say, "George, stop! stop! Lions or birds" or something. So when I leant over and said, "George, go like hell, rhino after us," he probably thought, "He's seen something," and would automatically stop. And I couldn't persuade him. I would say to him, "This evening, George, we were chased by a rhino and I said nothing and we didn't get hit." And he chuckled; I don't think he believed it.

'If you keep going with the old rhino, he gets quite close, but as long as you're getting out of the way he's quite happy. But if you stop! There were a hell of a lot of rhino in Meru in those days! Nothing left now. I took a series of pictures of a rhino coming, hitting the car and going away. I thought, I've got to persuade George that I did see it coming.'

Jonny Baxendale, who was older, larger and stronger than Giles Remnant, did not have any trouble with Ugas, who by this time had only one eye: the other, thought by George to have been damaged by a spitting cobra, had to be removed by surgery. 'Ugas was an incredible lion, huge, very nice-natured, much less excitable than the others. Between them, he and Boy, who was a lot younger, they managed to establish their own territory. With the lionesses they made a nice little pride and then they had cubs.

'But,' Baxendale says, 'in order to survive with creatures like that you have to understand them. There are two times when a lion is particularly dangerous: one's when he's got a small portion of meat; you



see it in the wild when they get a wart hog or something, they won't share it with anybody, and anybody who comes anywhere near them gets into trouble. The other time is when a lioness is in season; the lioness purrs and it's the only time a lioness purrs. It's the most amazing sound. And of course she loves everybody and this aggravates him more than anything. She's always trying to greet me, and everybody. We had this with Girl; Girl would come up purring and flopping on the ground and rolling upside down and of course when Boy came round the corner you just check out extremely fast or get back in your car. If you came within forty paces of Boy and his girlfriend or Ugas and his girlfriend you could expect a charge. They would probably go for you. Of course you wouldn't survive something like that.

The reason George survived all these years is that he literally thought like a lion. If you live with them that long, you really get to understand them. There were very few times that George ever or even nearly got into trouble. The thing was always to remain standing. And George had a little stick that he could smack them on the nose with.

*George and  
Boy: the best of  
friends*



With lions you've just got to show disapproval. If you don't want to play, you show disapproval and then they'll lay off. Otherwise the game continues and they grow into really big, heavy animals, and they sit on you.' Physically, George Adamson was quite short, but immensely wiry and extremely fit from a lifetime of walking across the vast, arid expanses of the Northern Frontier District. His calm, unflappable temperament and lack of any sort of fear made a perfect combination for dealing with any sort of wild animal, above all lions.

'George had a lovely deliberate movement, because of course amongst cats you must always be very deliberate, you mustn't move fast or jump. You couldn't make George jump under any circumstances. He was totally unruffled, always. That's why I find Joy so amazing and I wonder whether she really did have a particularly good rapport with the cats. She was fanatical of course, she loved them, and of course the good thing about cats and wild animals was they didn't answer back. Joy liked that.'

Jonny Baxendale had a soft spot for Girl and compares her with Elsa. 'Elsa was a really lovely creature, she was a unique animal. And I know

*Jonny Baxendale  
and George with  
Boy, Girl and  
Ugas (left).*

*Jonny's comment:  
'Joining in on the  
kill for some fresh  
buffalo steaks.'*







## Chapter Fifteen

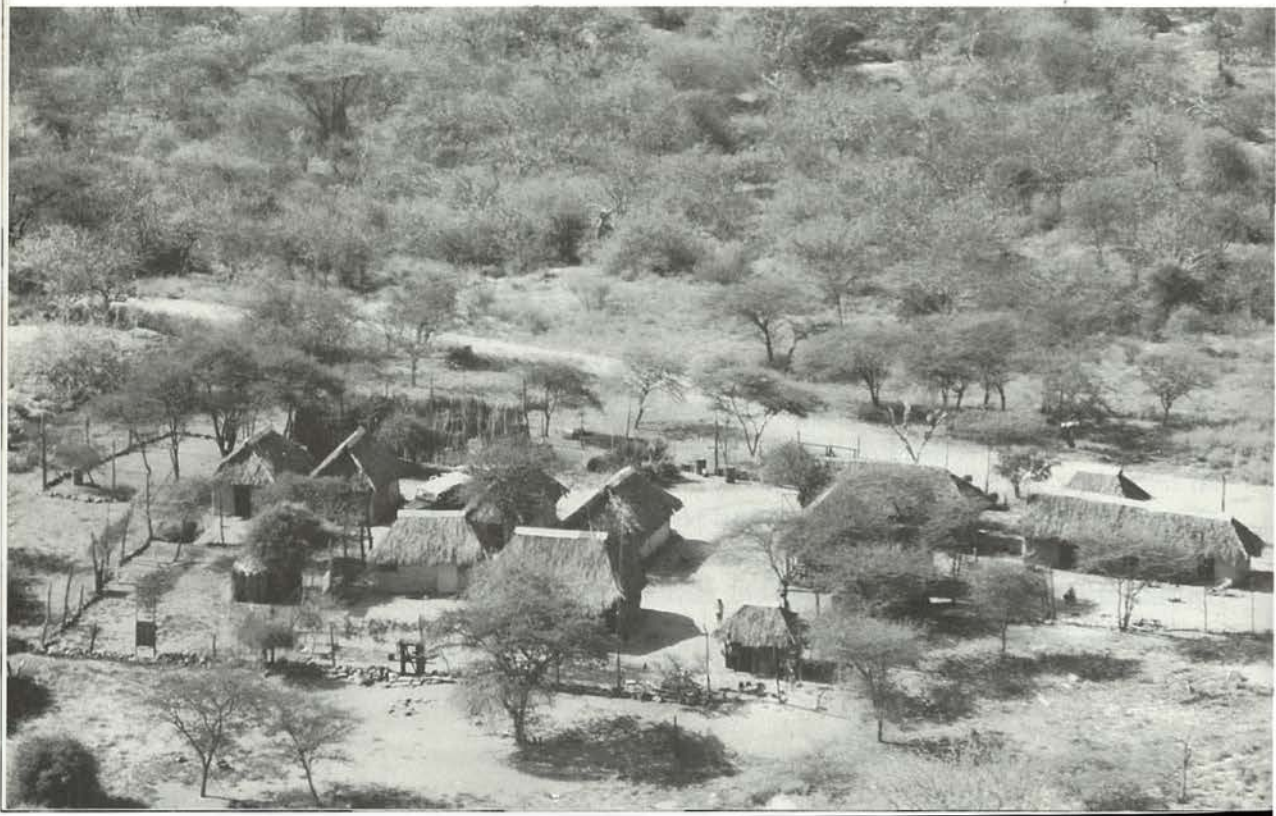
# RESTING IN ARCADIA

The funeral was held in Nairobi on 8 January 1980, with swarms of photographers, journalists and cameramen in attendance and with George, who must have loathed the whole occasion, looking unhappy and out of place in a suit and a tie. Among the journalists there that day was Brian Jackman of the *Sunday Times Magazine*, who had visited Joy at Shaba a few months before she was killed. George seems to have taken an immediate shine to him and invited him back to Kora: it was the start of a friendship which was to produce some memorable articles.

'I couldn't believe my luck, to fly back with the old boy to see his lions. That was my introduction to Kora. We flew into this dusty little strip, [Tony] Fitzjohn charges up in a beat-up old Land-Rover and I'm suddenly in the midst of all this thorn bush and the cackling hornbills and the burning heat and these big red rocks floating up above the bush, and I thought "My God, this is something, this is the place." Very much that dry, thorny, Hemingway's Africa and not at all like the green, grassy Mara, Serengeti kind of Kenya which I'd been used to.

'George said, "Right, let's go." He really wanted to get out and see what had been happening to his lions. So Fitzjohn drove us all out

*Kampi ya  
Simba, from the  
top of Kora Rock.  
George's hut is at  
the back, on the  
extreme left, with  
the cubs'  
compound directly  
in front of it*





through the bush towards the Tana river and said, "They're down here somewhere. They killed a waterbuck today and they should be still around." So we drove up and George gets out of the Land-Rover and starts calling, like someone in the park calling their dog. "Arusha! Arusha!" This is the big old matriarch and all of a sudden this huge lioness comes drifting out of the bushes, blood all over her muzzle from this waterbuck kill, sees George, shambles towards him, stands up on her hind legs, puts her huge paws over his shoulder like that and he puts his arm round her. "Oh, Arusha, old girl." She's sort of going, "Waoah, waoah," you know, making those lovely leonine grunts, and they're just like old pals. George shouts back to me, "Don't get out. I should stay in the Land-Rover if I were you." I thought, "My God, I'd absolutely no intention of getting out." I was sitting in the front passenger seat and eventually Arusha jumped down from George and she came nosing around the Land-Rover and came right up and stuck her head into the window and I realised for the first time how huge the head of a full grown lioness is. Absolutely enormous. And the cliché, you could actually feel her hot breath, rather smelly. Then she just drifted off. That was Day One in Kora.'

On 1 June 1986, Major Dougie Collins, sometime soldier, author and professional hunter then living in retirement in Lamu, received an SOS from Ken Smith on behalf of George Adamson. Would he fly to Kora and help George, now virtually on his own, to run the place? As Dougie explained in an unpublished account of his stay with George, entitled *The Old Man and his Lions*:

'Evidently George had suffered further losses since his wife had been murdered at her own camp several years ago. His only brother Terence had died two months previously. It was the self-effacing, hard-working, indefatigable Terence who had cut all the tracks and roads in the Reserve, had built Kampi ya Simba as well as keeping the tractor and ramshackle Land-Rovers going. To add to his misfortunes, his energetic and mercurial assistant, Tony Fitzjohn, together with his attractive and hard-working girlfriend Kim, were on the move to Tanzania. Ken asked me if I would team up with the old man and help out. Such a request needed no consideration from me.' A week later, Dougie flew in a small plane from Manda Island, the airstrip for Lamu, to Kora.

I had not seen George for some thirty years. Now in his early eighties, he looked fit and tanned although I had heard that his eyesight was failing. With his long mane of silvered white hair, moustache and neatly-trimmed beard, the familiar figure still looked the same and all in all I thought the years had dealt with him in kindly fashion. We entered the camp – a compound of a couple of acres, nestling at the foot of an enormous volcanic rock, one of the many of these frowning Inselbergs that are a feature in this particular sea of bush. The *makuti*-roofed primitive living quarters, mess, kitchen, stores and workshop were enclosed by a twelve-foot-high wire fence and inside one had the impression of occupying a large zoo, with the freed lion and leopard, all released in the wild as part of their unique programme, roaming at will outside. I was to find out that these great cats would pay friendly visits for camel and goat meat when they found the animals they normally preyed upon had disappeared due to the depredations of the poachers.

Over a frugal lunch on my first day with the slight wind rattling the palm-frond thatch above the mess, tame ground squirrels, dik dik, hornbills, doves, go-away birds and vulturine guinea fowl shared our food, for all animals, both great and small were welcome, watered and fed at this St Francis-like sanctuary. Afterwards the Old Man lit his pipe and put me in the picture. I learned that poaching was worse than I had believed possible. In the years 1960 to 1970 gangs of them, well-armed with automatic weapons, had descended on Kora to wipe out the entire population of some one hundred and fifty rhinoceros. As also the leopard. The once magnificent elephant herds had been reduced to pitifully small groups, mostly cows and calves, scattered and scared. Gone too were most of the buffalo, waterbuck, oryx, gerenuk, Grant's gazelle and reticulated giraffe in spite of the Game Department and anti-poaching unit's efforts to protect them. They were, and are, fighting a losing battle against the odds, for the poachers are better armed and more mobile than themselves. The threat from these poachers and marauding Shifta from over the Somalia border still remains, and whether in camp or sleeping out in the bush, a loaded rifle or revolver is always kept close at hand. The only connection with the outside world is the radio, and all supplies, petrol, diesel, food-stuffs and other necessities are obtained from Mwingi, ninety miles away on the main Garissa/Nairobi road. Every other day, a Land-



Rover loaded with empty drums is driven to the nearby Tana River to be filled with its chocolate-coloured water for drinking and cooking purposes.

'The lion-stocking programme has now come to an end and the Old Man would like nothing better than to introduce rhinoceros to this area where they were once so plentiful – but only if they could be adequately protected . . . As to the Old Man's achievements over the years, many of the originally released lions have died of old age, been poisoned or poached, or wandered off outside the Reserve, but many offspring are still to be found at Kora and they in turn have produced cubs. As an old White Hunter I was, understandably so I think, sceptical of my old friend's efforts to rehabilitate both lion and leopard and of his belief that lions can communicate with man. I am no longer so.

'In the early days of my lengthy stay there I was invited to accompany him in finding one of his prides: Coretta (C is favourite), Boldy and Cindy (named, apparently, after Cinderella, for she was so beautiful and shy) – three fully-grown lionesses, and also three half-grown cubs – the offspring of Coretta. The Old Man told me he had a feeling that they may be hungry due to the scarcity of game. We set off on our short safari one late afternoon. I was to drive a battered-looking Land-Rover containing the carcass of a camel he had purchased at an exorbitant price. I eyed the front tyres with some trepidation as they were worn down to the canvas. I say "with trepidation" for when approaching lion in my hunting days to photograph them the last thing I wanted was a flat tyre to prevent me making a hasty retreat if necessary. I followed the Old Man driving his own Land-Rover over the winding, bumpy, rock-strewn track. It was growing dusk when we finally stopped on a plain some fifteen miles from camp. We had a welcome sundowner by the side of the vehicles. It was now almost dark.

'The Old Man turned to me with a confident smile and said, "They won't be far from here." Producing a loud-hailer he then called Coretta three times. I checked my watch. Within three minutes I noticed a large, lithe yellow shape approaching out of the darkness. The shape approached closer.

"Coretta!" He smiled as he walked over to the lioness. "Come and greet her, Dougie." Other ghostly shapes now emerged to sit around the Old Man in a circle. The whole pride of six of them. I declined his

invitation, hastily poured myself another whisky and made ready to jump in the Land-Rover, for I had not his sublime faith. I thought the whole episode uncanny, for how could he know that the pride, especially at hunting time, would be exactly where he thought they would be in such an enormous area of wilderness? Lighting his pipe and puffing away happily, the Old Man now sauntered back to the cars.

"We'll turn round to motor back to a belt of trees on the edge of the plain," he said. "There is a chain round the carcase of the camel. I'll point out the tree. Back up to it and we'll tether the loose end round the trunk, then you start up, drive forward a little to pull it out of the car and they can feed there." I did as he asked but the chain was fouled up and after some time, vainly working in the dark, we gave up. The pride had now caught up with us and were growing restive. They looked hungry. The Old Man was quite unperturbed. Calmly puffing at his pipe, he said:

"It really doesn't matter. We will camp here for the night and they can feed in the back of your Land-Rover!" I felt quite relieved when he made the suggestion that we both sleep on the top of his own Land-Rover where he had two mattresses and an ingeniously constructed superstructure with shelving for drinks, thermos of coffee, soup and sandwiches.

That night under the stars proved to be exciting and exhilarating. Having fed continuously during the night just under our noses, the whole pride moved off at first light. A battered kettle was produced, tea, milk and sugar. I made a fire and brewed up. Some meat still remained on the camel's rib cage and I had little difficulty in kicking this out of the back of the Land-Rover. The Old Man eyed this unsavoury-looking mess speculatively to remark that they would be ready for another meal when they had slaked their thirst from the river.

"On the way back to camp we'll give it a tow. I think I know where to find them again," he said. Even now I was not wholly convinced of his quite remarkable powers of contacting the pride. During the fifteen miles from camp the previous day, I had noticed dozens of tracks leading to the river. As we towed the rib-cage back he unhesitatingly chose one of them and there – as we neared the river, lying in the middle of the sandy track – the whole pride sat waiting for him. After that I was totally won over.



'A couple of months before my arrival at Kampi ya Simba, a Japanese television team had been filming a documentary on the Old Man's lions. They called their film *Saint Lion*. Fulsome praise indeed for George Adamson, but a title I would not disagree with.'

There was indeed something saintly about George Adamson, his flowing white locks making him look like an Old Testament prophet, although his philosophy was much closer to the New. What struck me most about him when I first met him was how wonderfully tolerant he was of other people's foibles and failings; he was perhaps the nicest man I have ever known. His personality and way of life exerted a rare fascination, especially on the young. They flocked to him for a variety of reasons, but all of them, in their different ways, found in Kora a peace and understanding they failed to find elsewhere. George Adamson's Kora was a kind of Shangri-La, a Never-Never Land; but also, in its harsh way, an earthly paradise where the lion, it seemed, might lie down with the lamb, or if not with the lamb at least with man.

One of Tony Fitzjohn's former girlfriends, Carol Byrne, who visited George at Kora as a young woman in the seventies, is still very conscious of the healing power of his personality. 'One evening I was with George on that rock he used to like to go and have his drink on; it had a lovely view. We were sitting up there one evening, we hadn't seen any lions for an awful long time and suddenly this huge lion gave me a great shove and it was Lisa. The sun was just setting, it had been absolutely perfect until that moment. Then for me it wasn't quite so perfect. I had total trust in George. I was never frightened when I was with George at all, because I assumed he was in control. He didn't have a gun though that day because we hadn't seen the lions for so long. He just told me to stand up. "Whatever you do, don't get pushed over," and he called for [Tony] Fitzjohn and we were trying to battle this lion off. They rub against you and can knock you over.' Tony Fitzjohn came up the rock to join them and said, "We'll go back with Lisa between us. You walk ahead but just walk very slowly." And every time she looked as if she was trying to walk after me the two of them closed in on her. That's how we got back.

'Over all the years, in the later part of his life he'd acquired a great deal of wisdom. He was somebody who was at one with nature, with his own life, and that's very attractive to people who are searching, who don't know who they are, or where they are. I certainly found