Revenge

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Abstract

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REVENGE

An excerpt from
A GOOD DISTAURI,
a complete short story.

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“He was a ‘meridadi,’ Mynheer . . . such gorgeous ones are of no use. . . .” Kombayo was calmer now, but the young Boer still raged about the clearing.

“Damn it, Kombayo! I should have known! My father would have given him the kiboko long ago! We needed him, for all that! If I ever see him again. . . .”

“No, Mynheer, it is better. A gorgeous one has no place in an elephant hunt, even guarding mules. We are better without him. We must leave the mules here and chance leopard . . . perhaps the gods will smile upon us.”
Sketch

So it was that they picketed the mules in the clearing, placing the remaining food and supplies in a tree crotch. They made the preparations quickly, taking nothing with them but ammunition, the clothes they wore, and potio and water.

The late season showed itself. The day promised much heat; it was lowering and heavy, and the sun shone as a glow rather than as a direct light. Their urgency was increased by these signs, for they saw the rains were near, and soon tracking would be impossible. There was a week at most, and much to do, and so they traveled swiftly.

Kombayo took the lead, following a deep, worn game trail that would lead to the lake. Hans followed quietly, carrying the rifle. This had been decided previously . . . Kombayo was not to act as a bearer, but only as a tracker, devoting his full and remarkable energies to the task.

They traveled without stopping for four hours, and the black, thin back in front of Hans ran with sweat. As they neared the lake the Zulu became increasingly cautious and vigilant. He would pause in his travel to cast about like a hound, stopping to listen and carefully examine a bush or tree. The path led through a high forest of eucalyptus and togolo. The trees were not dense, but the areas between them were filled with thorn and ironwood . . . thick and impenetrable but for the game trails that led, from every section of the forest, always to the lake.

They traveled easily . . . the deep rut was smooth and they were fresh. Their progress thus became slower, not because of fatigue, but rather because of Kombayo's intentness on the path ahead of them. He would stoop now to touch and smell the ground, only to rise and walk slowly forward, head bowed. When they at last came to the lake, Kombayo motioned Hans to come close by him and they left the trail, crawling on their bellies beneath the ironwood that fringed the bank. They made their way to the edge of the water and lay there listening. After a time, Kombayo nodded and crawled off through the ironwood alone. Hans waited, looking out across the great lake and longing with every fibre for his pipe, but contenting himself instead with slapping flies.
"Mynheer . . . Mynheer." There came a whisper. Kombayo had returned, and his black, shining face nodded at Hans from the thick ironwood. "Come. . ."

Hans slithered after him, following the black sandals along the bank, but out of sight of the water. They moved in this fashion for a quarter of a mile, and then the old Zulu was suddenly waiting by the edge of the bank. They had stopped above a narrow mud shelf at which Kombayo nodded and pointed with his lower lip.

There were two tracks there, and Hans gasped at the sight of them. They were formless . . . great depressions in the mud with oozed, erupted edges. A ponderous weight had been there. Hans judged them to be nearly the length of his rifle, and so deep that a small boy could hide in them and not be seen. The mud was soft, it was true, but even so Hans felt dwarfed, and for the first time he felt an ebbing confidence in the .500 Magnum rifle. He turned his head to Kombayo and whispered loudly.

"When?"

"Last evening, when we made camp far below. It is well we stopped. Perhaps he does not yet know of us. . ."

They lay there beside the lake until dusk, but there was no further sign of the beast that had made the pits in the mud shelf. They watched a kudu come and drink, and later a pair of kopi. There was even a flash of a leopard, but no hint of elephant. Kombayo nodded to the darkening thickets and they crawled back to eat potio and empty a water gourd. It was cool there in the ironwood, and so it was there they fell asleep, lying upon thick fern.

Hans was shaken awake by Kombayo at dawn. There was the first of the sun in the top of the thicket, and the sound of hornbills and linnets. Hans ate his potio and they set off along a game trail that paralleled the lake. For an hour they walked erect, moving in the open, and then Kombayo again took to the brush. Neither had spoken, and they traveled so until noon when the Zulu called a halt. They stood up and stretched. Hans showed his weariness already . . . he was filthy and tired and his shirt clung to his back, but the old Zulu seemed as fresh as when they had left the camp below twenty-four hours before. He took the
leather-covered water gourd from his shoulder and handed it to the young man, never speaking. Hans drank long, rinsed his face, and returned it. As the Zulu raised it to drink he froze, and then dropped in his tracks. Hans caught a glimpse of something gray and moving in the trees before them. He saw patches of a great, drifting bulk, and even as Kobayo dropped to the ground he raised the rifle and fired. He had had a single clear glimpse of this soundless behemoth... just enough to shoot by.

His father's rifle was a terrible weapon... a double Jeffries, firing a half-inch bullet with two hundred grains of cordite, but now it was as nothing. He fired once at the passing flank there high in the forest, and heard the 'whoonk' of the heavy bullet as it went home. With the shattering blast of the rifle Kobayo pulled him down and held him there. It had been a foolhardy thing to do... a passing shadow only, and he had fired.

He did not reload the rifle... he could not. He lay there beside the old gunbearer and listened to the trumpeting and crashing just beyond them. For nearly an hour it continued, sometimes near and sometimes far, never quite finding where they lay, but always seeking. They were frozen by the sounds of rage, made worse by the crashing of what Hans knew to be trees the size of his waist. Even when the sounds became distant, they lay there, numbed by the thought of the destruction that had sought them. When at last Kobayo sat up and looked around him, Hans could not look him in the face... he was crestfallen; a stupid schoolboy who had nearly killed them both. Kobayo did not comment, but only nodded again to the Boer and said "Come, Mynheer... 'bandika'... let us go."

And so onward through the heat of a thousand thickets, made more terrible by the thought of the dread intelligence that waited somewhere ahead. They moved forever on their hands and knees beneath the ironwood, and when darkness finally came again and Kobayo stopped, Hans fell asleep lying across his father's rifle. They started moving again in the very darkness in which he had fallen asleep, always following the shore of the lake like a pair of slugs. There was
no sense of time, but only that soon it was light again. When
they stopped to eat the potio . . . the eternal, tasteless potio,
Kombayo spoke to him. "We must find the elephant as he
stiffens, Mynheer . . . before he travels too far. He will
seek the lake."

"But we are not by the lake now," Hans said dully.

"Just so, Mynheer. Nor will we be, for he expects us."

They washed the potio down with the last of the water
and set off again. Hans' trousers were in rags . . . from the
knees down they were shredded, and the rifle was breaking
his back. He had hurled his youth and strength against the
maddening ironwood branches until he was drained of all
desires except for sleep. He felt a hundred years old, and
still he followed the black feet ahead of him. Hours passed,
and the sun no longer fell with violence. It was to his right
now, as it had been in the morning . . . they were traveling
in a great circle. Kombayo dropped back beside him and
motioned ahead. "Come and see, Mynheer."

They crossed a game trail and into the opposite thicket,
and there the Zulu stopped again and stood, pointing to
his feet. He stood before a great pile of dung that was
streaked and filled with drying blood. The center of the
spoor had been smashed and flattened by a huge foot. The
Zulu looked at Hans, his face filled with respect and know­
ledge.

"It is as I have thought, Mynheer. The tembo stood here
throughout the day watching the trail. See! He turned . . .
there is his foot!"

"Did you know, Kombayo?"

"I knew . . . and we circled!" Now we will sleep, for
tomorrow we shall kill the elephant!"

There is in every man a fear of the unknown. It is in
the things not apparent that we place our greatest dread . . .
to face hell may not be so terrible a thing as the living of
the life that precedes it. It was so now with Hans Krohl.
He did not wish to avoid the elephant, but wished only to
see it. But for the single fleeting shadow it was yet to be
seen, and even in his terrible bone-weariness he would have
flung himself upon it if it had become suddenly tangible.
He had hunted lion and taken his chances in the tall waving
grass of the veldt, but to be ambushed in a dim forest by
a patient malevolence was another thing.

On the fourth day of the search he became angry, and
with the anger came a cunning. He summoned the last of
his reserves, and followed so closely on the heels of Kombayo
that the old Zulu was forced to increase his pace in spite of
himself. They still crawled, and although it seemed that it
could not have been possible, the crawling became more
demanding, for they had left the ironwood thickets and
moved through patches of tall thorn. They felt the sun now,
and there were many stops for water. Even through his
fatigue Hans felt a release, for he understood the sun . . .
a green, dim thicket was not a good place for a man to face
such a task.

Although their range of vision had vastly improved,
Kombayo no longer watched closely, but rather listened.
Near noon, when they had finished the last of the potio, he
heard what he listened for, and wormed his way across the
patches of rock and bare hard ground between the stands
of thorn. When the sun was directly above them he stopped
in the shadow of a bush and pointed ahead.

"See the birds, Mynheer . . . there . . . above the clump
that is the largest!" Hans joined him and looked to see
a great patch of thorn scrub . . . thick twisted little trees
that were some fifteen feet in height. It was a large area of
thorn, roughly circular and covering about three acres.
Above it were two or three small birds that gave a queer
piping cry . . . the sound that the Zulu had evidently been
seeking.

"They are bull birds, Mynheer. With them are to be
found only two things . . . the elephant or 'Faru' . . . the
rhino, and this is not the land of Faru!" Hans looked at him
and smiled, and the old Zulu returned the smile. The young
man did not complain. The young mynheer would some
day make a great master.

"One thing, Mynheer . . . it is not my 'cazi' . . . my ethic,
that you go alone; but you must. It is the task which your
father has given you, and which you must do. Besides, two
men would be useless there. . ."
Hans removed his hat and bush jacket, leaving them by the bush with the bandolier of heavy cartridges.

He ran stooping across the bare, baked strip of intervening ground and entered the thorn on his belly. He lay flat, for it was the only way he could see ahead. The thorn branched tightly two feet above the ground to form a solid screen of interlocking branches armed with three inch spines. The ground itself, while free of undergrowth, was littered with the old dried thorn twigs that tore at flesh and clothing. It was impossible for him to worm his way across this without flaying himself, so he moved the debris aside with his left arm, holding the heavy elephant rifle clear of the ground with his right. It was an awkward, exhausting mode of travel, and each forty feet he was forced to rest. There could be no exhaustion now; no pounding heart to deflect the sights of the rifle. It was now that he missed his strength, the vigor that had been spent during the long trek and in the terrible ironwood thickets.

When he had gone fifty yards he was drenched with sweat. His shirt was sodden, and to wipe his sleeve across his eyes was only to blur them more. The back of his neck and his wet arms were covered with bits of dry bark and flies that he dared not brush away. He spent an hour covering the first hundred yards. His elbows were bleeding from the dry, hard earth, and his head was bursting from the heat and the whine of insects. Finally he lay upon his back, holding the rifle across his belly, and gasping air. It should be soon now. He would need his wind and a settled pulse.

It was as he lay there that he heard the distant, hollow rumble. It seemed close at hand, too close for thunder . . . and the day was clear. Then came the shock of knowledge, and he rolled slowly over and looked to his left. There were two great, wrinkled pillars in the small space beneath the heavy screen of thorn, and he heard the rumbling again. It was there, fifty feet away, and he knew it now for the stomach rumblings of an elephant.

He lay there breathless for a long time, and as he watched, patches of gray, dusty hide began to materialize through spaces of thorn. He looked up and up, and everywhere he caught glimpses of the huge side. It towered
there just above him, not moving, but watching ahead on the trail. He knew he must move soon, for the small stirrings of the air might change, and he would be lost. If the beast sensed him at such a range he would only be part of a broken mass of thorn. It was close, much too close, but retreat was senseless.

He reached to his belt and drew out the two extra cartridges. There was always a chance of reloading after he had fired, and he must use that chance, however slim it might be. He had coated those cartridges, as well as the ones in his chambers, with graphite. There must be no failure of the extraction of the spent cases... if he got that second chance the rifle must be ready.

He gripped the cartridges in his left hand and began to pivot his body until his feet would face those gray legs. As he inched his way around to position, he saw one of the patches of hide move. As he looked he saw that it had an edge... it was thin and flat, as is a great sheet of leather. He now knew that he was somewhere quartering behind the elephant, and that what he saw was part of a vast ear. This was about what he wanted, for the shot must strike the brain... at such close quarters there was no other way.

He watched until he spied a fleck of white farther forward. That would be the tusk. The white that he could see ended nine feet above the ground and it was there that the head began; behind this was that thin, waving edge of leather. He was so close that he could see fly warbles behind the ear and insects crawling there.

He lay flat on his back, head and shoulders raised and the rifle at ready. He brought it to bear, slipping the safety at the same time. At the click of the release, quiet as it had been, the edge of the ear moved forward... it had heard. All was ready... there were many twigs and small limbs, but nothing that could stop the flight of a thousand grains of lead. He placed a finger on each trigger, covered one of the fly warbles with the sights, and squeezed.

Hans was slammed flat by the recoil... the double discharge beat him into the earth, and he felt a wondering at the amount of dust that is raised by two foot-tons of muzzle energy. His shoulder and arm were numb, but in
one movement he snapped the rifle open and threw in the loads that he held. Everywhere he saw dust, but he heard nothing. His head was still filled with the blast and reek of the cordite. He had only vision, but nothing emerged from the dust . . . there was only the ring and roar of his ears. He was on his knees now, and he crawled forward into the veil of dust, safety on ‘red,’ and looked through the thorn.

The elephant lay on its stomach, in a swelter of broken thorn and dust, and even as Hans fired the second time, the great head was sinking to the ground. It rested there on the eight foot tusks, and through the settling dust the Boer could see Kombayo loping around the far edge of the thorn.

The spring had unwound, and Hans sat limply down and looked for his pipe. He lit it and watched the Zulu walk in wonder about the gray mountain of flesh, pausing in amazement to inspect the great lengths of ivory.

He approached Hans and sat beside him, not speaking. The pipe was finished, and as they sat there the young man’s ears ceased some of their ringing, and he could hear the song of a small brown linnet somewhere in the thorn beside him.

When the shadows became long Kombayo rose and bowed. “We can go now, Bwana.” Hans stood and knocked out his pipe, and they walked off together in the direction of the mules and the Transvaal.

There were no more questions to be asked.