VINTAGE

THE LOST WORLD OF THE KALAHARI: WITH 'THE GREAT AND THE LITTLE MEMORY'

LAURENS VAN DER POST

Contents

About the Book

Laurens van der Post was fascinated and appalled at the fate of this remarkable people. Ostracised by all the changing face of African cultural life they retreated deep into the Kalahari desert. His fascinating attempt to capture their way of life and the secrets of their ancient heritage provide captivating reading and a unique insight into a forgotten way of life.

About the Author

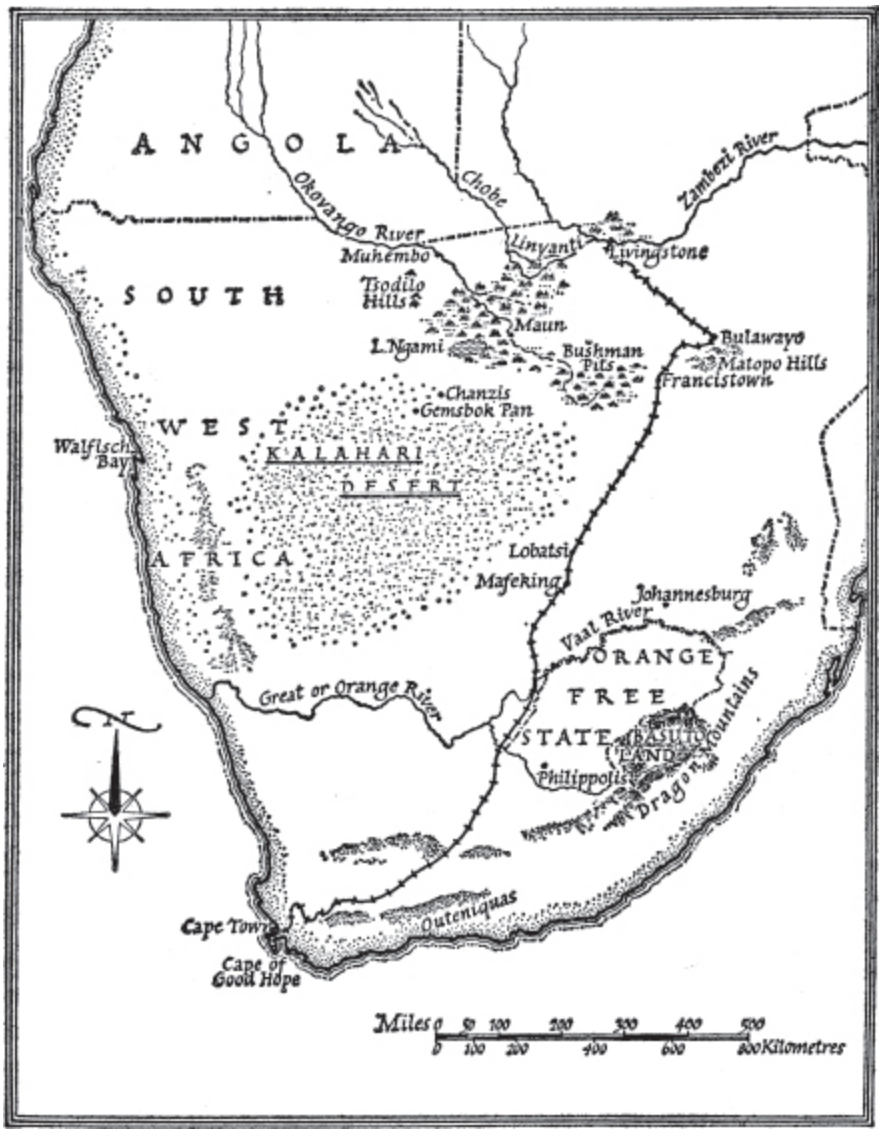
Laurens van der Post was born in South Africa in 1906, the thirteenth of fifteen children in a family of Dutch and French Huguenot origins. Most of his adult life was spent with one foot in Africa and one in England. His professions of writer and farmer were interrupted by ten years of soldiering in the British Army, serving with distinction in the Western Desert, Abyssinia, Burma and the Far East. Taken prisoner by the Japanese, he was held in captivity for three years before returning to active service as a member of Lord Mountbatten's staff in Indonesia and, later, as Military Attaché to the British Minister in Java.

After 1949 he undertook several official missions exploring little-known parts of Africa, and his journey in search of the Bushmen in 1957 formed the basis of his famous documentary film and *The Lost World of the Kalahari*. Other television films included *All Africa Within Us* and *The Story of Carl Gustav Jung*, whom he met after the war and grew to know as a personal friend. In 1934 he wrote *In a Province*, the first book by a South African to expose the horror of racism. Other books include *Venture to the Interior* (1952), *The Heart of the Hunter* (1961) and *A Walk with a White Bushman* (1986). *The Seed and the Sower* was made into a film under the title *Merry Christmas, Mr Lawrence* and *A Story Like the Wind* and *A Far-Off Place* were combined and made into the film *A Far-Off Place*.

Sir Laurens van der Post was awarded the CBE in 1947 and received his knighthood in 1981. He died in 1996.

OTHER WORKS BY LAURENS VAN DER POST

In a Province
Venture to the Interior
The Face Beside the Fire
Flamingo Feather
The Dark Eye in Africa
The Heart of the Hunter
The Seed and the Sower
Journey into Russia
The Hunter and the Whale
The Night of the New Moon
A Story Like the Wind
A Far-Off Place
A Mantis Carol
Jung and the Story of our Time
First Catch Your Eland
Yet Being Someone Other
A Walk With a White Bushman
About Blady: A Pattern Out of Time
The Voice of the Thunder
Feather Fall


ANGOLA
Okovango River
Chobe
Zambezi River
Muhembo
Tsodilo Hills
Linyanti
Livingstone
SOUTH
Maun
L. Ngami
Bushman Pits
Bulawayo
Matopo Hills
Francistown
Chanzis
Gemsbok Pan
WEST
KALAHARI
DESERT
Walfisch Bay
AFRICA
Lobatsi
Mafeking
Johannesburg
Vaal River
ORANGE
FREE
STATE
Great or Orange River
BASUTO LAND
Philippolis
Dragon Mountains
Outeniquas
Cape Town
Cape of Good Hope
Miles 0 50 100 200 300 400 500
0 100 200 400 600 800 Kilometres

To the memory of Klara
who had a Bushman mother and
nursed me from birth;
and to my wife Ingaret Giffard, for saying
without hesitation when I mentioned
the journey to her:
‘But you must go and do it
at once’

The Lost World of the Kalahari

Laurens van der Post

Pass world!: I am the dreamer that remains;
The man clear cut against the horizon.

Roy Campbell

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

CHAPTER 1

The Vanished People

THIS IS THE story of a journey in a great wasteland and a search for some pure remnant of the unique and almost vanished First People of my native land, the Bushmen of Africa. The journey in fact was accomplished barely a year ago, but in a deeper sense it began long before that. Indeed so far back in time does all this go that I am unable to determine precisely when it did begin. I know for certain only that no sooner did I become aware of myself as a child than my imagination slipped, like a hand into a glove, into a profound pre-occupation with the little Bushman and his terrible fate.

I was born near the Great River, in the heart of what for thousands of years had been great Bushman country. The Bushman himself as a coherent entity had already gone, but I was surrounded from birth by so many moving fragments of his race and culture that he felt extraordinarily near. I was always meeting him afresh on the lips of living men. Beside the open hearth on cold winters' nights on my mother's farm of Wolwekop, 'the Mountain of the Wolves' (as my countrymen call the big striped hyaenas), or round the camp fire with the jackals' mournful bark raising an apprehensive bleat from a newly-lambed ewe in the flock kraaled nearby and with the night-plover wailing over the black plain like a bosun's pipe, there the vanished Bushman would be vividly at the centre of some hardy pioneering

reminiscence; a Bushman gay, gallant, mischievous, unpredictable, and to the end unrepentant and defiant. Though gone from the land, he still stalked life and reality in the mixed blood of the coloured peoples as subtly as he ever stalked the multitudinous game of Africa. He was present in the eyes of one of the first women to nurse me, her shining gaze drawn from the first light of some unbelievably antique African day. Here a strain of Bushman blood would give an otherwise good Bantu face an odd Mongolian slant; there would turn a good central African black to an apricot yellow or just break out, like a spark of electricity, in the clicks of onomatopoeic invention which the Bushman had forced on an invader's sonorous tongue.

The older I grew the more I resented that I had come too late on the scene to know him in the flesh. For many years I could not accept that the door was closed for ever on the Bushman. I went on seeking for news and information of him as if preparing for the moment when the door would open and he would reappear in our midst. Indeed I believe the first objective question I ever asked of life was: 'Who, really, was the Bushman?' I asked it of people of all races and colours who might have had contact with him, to the point where many a patient heart must have found it hard to bear with the uncomprehended importunity of a child. They told me much. But what they told me only made me hunger for more.

They said he was a little man, not a dwarf or pigmy, but just a little man about five feet in height. He was well, sturdily, and truly made. His shoulders were broad but his hands and feet were extraordinarily small and finely modelled. The oldest of our 'Suto servants told me that one had only to see his small precise footprints in the sand never to forget them. His ankles were slim like a race-horse, his legs supple, his muscles loose, and he ran like the wind, fast and long. In fact when on the move he hardly ever walked but, like the springbuck or wild-dog, travelled at an

easy trot. There had never been anyone who could run like him over the veld and boulders, and the bones of many a lone Basuto and Koranna were bleaching in the sun to prove how vainly they had tried to out-distance him. His skin was loose and very soon became creased and incredibly wrinkled. When he laughed, which he did easily, his face broke into in-numerable little folds and pleats of a most subtle and endearing criss-cross pattern. My pious old grandfather explained that this loose plastic skin was ‘a wise dispensation of Almighty Providence’ to enable the Bushman to eat more food at one feasting than any man in the history of mankind had ever eaten before. His life as a hunter made it of vital importance that he should be able to store great reserves of food in his body. As a result his stomach, after he had eaten to capacity, made even a man look like a pregnant woman. In a good hunting season his figure was like that of a Rubens’ Cupid, protruding in front and even more behind. Yes, that was another of the unique characteristics of this original little Bushman body. It had a behind which served it rather as the hump serves the camel! In this way nature enabled him to store a reserve of valuable fats and carbo-hydrates against dry and hungry moments. I believe the first scientific term I ever learnt was the name anatomists gave to this phenomenon of the Bushman body: steatopygia.

One night, by the fireside, I seem to remember my grandfather and the oldest of my aunts saying that in a lean time the Bushman behind would shrink until it was much like any normal behind except for the satiny creases where his smooth buttocks joined his supple legs. But in a good hunting season it would stick out so much that you could stand a bottle of brandy with a tumbler on it! We all laughed at this, not derisively but with affectionate pride and wonder that our native earth should have produced so unique a little human body. Somehow, my heart and imagination were deeply concerned with this matter of the Bushman’s shape.

The Hottentots, who were very like him, much as I loved them could not excite my spirit as did the Bushman. They were too big. The Bushman was just right. There was magic in his build. Whenever my mother read us a fairy-tale with a little man performing wonders in it, he was immediately transformed in my imagination into a Bushman. Perhaps this life of ours, which begins as a quest of the child for the man, and ends as a journey by the man to rediscover the child, needs a clear image of some child-man, like the Bushman, wherein the two are firmly and lovingly joined in order that our confused hearts may stay at the centre of their brief round of departure and return.

But the Bushman's appetite, shape, and steatopygia were, though remarkable, by no means the only unique features of his body. His colour, I was told, was unlike that of any other of the many peoples of Africa, a lovely Provençal apricot yellow. The old Basutu I have quoted told me that one most remarkable thing about the Bushman was that although he wore no clothes his skin never burnt dark in the sun. He moved in the glare and glitter of Africa with a flame-like flicker of gold like a fresh young Mongol of the Central Mongolian plain. His cheeks, too, were high-boned like a Mongol's and his wide eyes so slanted that some of my ancestors spoke of him as a 'Chinese-person'. There is a great plain between blue hills in South Africa called to this day the 'Chinese Vlakte' after the Bushman hunters who once inhabited it. His eyes were of the deep brown I have mentioned, a brown not seen in any other eye except in those of the antelope. It was clear and shone like the brown of day on a rare dewy African morning, and was unbelievably penetrating and accurate. He could see things at a distance where other people could discern nothing, and his powers of vision have become part of the heroic legend in Africa. The shape of the face tended to be heart-like, his forehead broad, and chin sensitive and pointed. His ears were Pan-like, finely made and pointed. His hair was black

and grew in thick round clusters which my countrymen called, with that aptitude for scornful metaphor they unfailingly exercised on his behalf, ‘pepper-corn hair’. His head was round, neatly and easily joined to a slender neck and throat on broad shoulders. His nose tended to be broad and flat, the lips full, and the teeth even and dazzlingly white. His hips were narrow and, as my aunt said, ‘Lord, verily it has been a beautiful thing to see him move!’

But perhaps the most remarkable thing about the Bushman was his originality. Even in the deepest and most intimate source of his physical being he was made differently from other men. The women were born with a natural little apron, the so-called *tablier égyptien*, over their genitals; the men were born, lived, and died with their sexual organs in a semi-erect position. The Bushman found dignity in this fact and made no attempt falsely to conceal it. Indeed he accepted it so completely as the most important difference between himself and other men that he gave his people the name of ‘*Qhwai-xkhwe*’ which openly proclaims this fact. The sound of natural relish that the word ‘*Qhwai-xkhwe*’ makes on his lips is a joy to hear, and the click of the complex consonants flashes on his tongue as he utters them like a sparkle of sun on a burst of flower from our sombre mountain gorse. He has even painted himself all over the rocks of Africa in naked silhouette plainly demonstrating this distinguishing feature of his race, not with the obscene intent which some European archaeologists have projected into him, but simply because his God, with care aforethought, in the great smithy of Africa had forged him naked and unashamed just like that.

Only one thing seems really to have worried the Bushman regarding his stature and that was his size. Often I have been impressed by the extraordinary energy of revolt I have encountered in the spirit of many little men and have seen something of its exacting consequences in their own and other lives. Nor have I forgotten how disastrously this revolt

can be orchestrated in the complexes and policies of whole races. When a prisoner of war of the Japanese, I have been punished at times, I am certain, for no other reason than that I was often taller than those who had me in their power. Yet I have a suspicion that the Bushman's reaction to his smallness was of a different kind and brought about solely by his helplessness to repel the ruthless invasion of his country by men so much taller than he – men who seemed, in fact, so tall that he painted them on the rocks like giants! There was no doubt in the minds of those who had known him that his spirit was raw and vulnerable regading his size. According to my mother's elder sister, our favourite aunt (who could count up to ten in Bushman and utter his formal greeting for our delight although invariably she went dangerously purple in the process), it was fatal to remark on the Bushman's smallness in his presence. More, it was often perilous to show in one's bearing that one was aware of dealing with a person smaller than oneself.

Our old 'Suto hands strongly supported my aunt with their own colourful illustrations. They said they had always been warned never to show any surprise if they unexpectedly came upon a Bushman in the veld in case he took it to imply they could have seen him sooner had he not been so small. When, unexpectedly, one ran into a Bushman the only wise thing to do was promptly to blame oneself for the surprise and say: 'Please do not look so offended. Do you really imagine a big person like you could hide without being seen? Why we saw you from a long way off and came straight here!' Immediately the fire in those shining eyes would die down, the golden chest expand enormously and gracefully he would make one welcome. In fact, the oldest of the old Basutos once told me one could not do better than use the Bushman's own greeting, raising one's open right hand high above the head, and calling out in a loud voice: '*Tshjamm*: Good day! I saw you looming up afar and I am dying of hunger.' Europeans so often use a diminutive

for that which they want to endear. But with the Bushman this mechanism is reversed. The pitiless destructive forces sent against him by fate seemed to mock his proportions until he sought perhaps to appease his sense of insecurity with a wishful vision of a physical superlative he has never possessed. So, in his rock-paintings the Bushman depicts himself in battle as a giant against other giants to such a degree that, were it not for his '*Qhwai-xkhwe*', he would be hardly distinguishable from his towering enemies.

But, I was told, this little man before all else was a hunter. He kept no cattle, sheep, or goats except in rare instances where he had been in prolonged contact with foreigners. He did not cultivate the land and therefore grew no food. Although everywhere his women and children dug the earth with their deft grubbing sticks for edible bulbs and roots and, in season, harvested veld and bush for berries and fruit, their lives and happiness depended mainly on the meat which he provided. He hunted in the first place with bow and arrow and spear. The heads of his arrows were dipped in a poison compounded from the grubs, roots, and glands of the reptiles of the land and he himself had such a respect for the properties of his own poison that he never went anywhere without the appropriate antidote in a little skin wallet tied securely to his person. My grandfather and aunt said that he was so natural a botanist and so expert an organic chemist that he used different poisons on different animals, the strongest for the eland and the lion, and less powerful variants for the smaller game. His arrows were made of flint or bone until he came to barter for iron with those about to become his enemies.

As an archer he was without equal. My grandfather said he could hit a moving buck at 150 yards, adding that he would not have liked to expose any part of himself in battle to a Bushman archer under a hundred and fifty yards' range. But he not only hunted with bow and arrow. In the rivers and streams he constructed traps beautifully woven

out of reeds and buttressed with young karee wood or harde-kool (the ‘Hard-Coal’ wood my ancestors used in their nomadic smithy fires), and so caught basketfuls of our lovely golden bream, or fat olive-green barbel with its neck and huge head of bone and moustaches like those of ‘a soldier of the Victorian Queen’, Hongroise-pomaded point and all. The baskets at the end of the traps were like the eel-baskets of Europe but never so bleakly utilitarian. They were woven of alternate white and black plaits not because they were better that way but, my aunt said with great emphasis, because the Bushman wanted to make them pretty. Hard-by among the singing reeds he dug pits with a cunningly-covered spike in the centre in order to trap the nocturnal hippopotamus whose sweet lard meant more to him than foie-gras to any gourmet.

When my grandfather first crossed the Orange River, or the Great River as the Bushman and we who were born close always called it, there were still many of those big game pits left. The trekkers, or covered-wagon pioneers of my people, kept patrols of horsemen scouting well ahead of the lumbering convoys to look out for these holes and, on a signal, someone would go to the front of the large span of oxen and lifting the lead rope from the horns of the two guide-oxen, march carefully at their head. My grandfather often said he wished he had a dollar for every mile he had led his span by the head through the veld. Once in very early childhood, on one of our spring hunting and fishing excursions in the deep bed of the Great River, I saw some of those holes. The spikes in the centre and the top-cover were gone but I remember the sensation of wonder that came over me as one of the elder men said: ‘That’s how he did it! That’s how fat old tannie sea-cow found her way into the pot.’ ‘Old tannie sea-cow’ was our endearing way of naming the hippopotamus, so called because it was there in the surf of the sea to welcome my people when they first landed in Africa. Between the sea and the Great River of my childhood

lay hundreds of difficult miles, and it was impossible to find a place of water and reeds not associated in local legend and story with the sea-cow. However, long before this day of which I am speaking, ‘Fat little old aunt sea-cow’ had vanished like the Bushman, who had so admired her waistline and so loved her lard.

In the tracks between water-holes and rivers the Bushman spread snares of tough home-made rope. The snares according to my grandfather were made of several kinds but the favourite was the classical hangman’s noose. The noose was spread round the rim of a hole delicately covered over with grass and sand. Its end was tied to a tense spring made of the fiercely resilient stem of blue bush wood. This stem was doubled over into the sand and so triggered that, however deft a buck’s toe or crafty a leopard’s paw, the merest touch would release the spring. The noose would instantly be jerked tight and the straightened stem hang the lively animal by paw or throat in the air.

So skilful and confident a hunter did the Bushman become that he did not hesitate to match himself in the open against the biggest and the thickest-skinned animals. For instance, my grandfather said he would provoke the male by darting in and out of a herd of elephant, or teasing the smaller crashes of rhinoceroses, relying only on his knowledge of their ways and his own supple limbs for survival. He would contrive to do this until an angry elephant bull or some never very enlightened rhinoceros father would charge out to deal with him. Twisting and turning and shrieking a charm of magic words, the Bushman would flee until the animal was involved in a baffling pursuit. Then a companion would run up behind unperceived to attack the only place where such a rampant animal was vulnerable to Stone-Age weapons. Smartly he would slice through the tendons above the heel. The animal now helpless on its haunches, the Bushman would close in to finish him off with spears and knives.

On top of his great daring and resource as a hunter, he was also subtle. That was a quality stressed by all those who had known him. He never seems to have attempted to accomplish by force what could be achieved by wit. The emphasis in his own natural spirit was on skill rather than violence. I can remember my grandfather saying with a note of admiration if not envy strangely alive on his pious Calvinist tongue: 'Yes! he was clever, diabolically clever.' The Bushman would, for example, use the lion as his hunting dog. When his normal methods of hunting failed him he would frighten the game in the direction of a hungry lion. He would let the lion kill and eat enough only to still its hunger, but not enough to make it lazy. Then the Bushman would drive the lion off with smoke and fire, and move in to eat the rest of the kill. In this way he would follow a favourite lion about from kill to kill and it was extraordinary how he and the lion came to respect their strange partnership. My grandfather said there was something uncanny about it. He remembered, too, his father telling him that when they first felt their way into the country across the Great River they found that all the lions were man-eaters. The many thousands of dead bodies left on the veld after a generation of massacre and counter-massacre by Korannas, Griquas, Mantatees, Zulu, Matabele, and Barolong had given the lions such a taste for human flesh that they ignored the herds of game whenever it was possible to go after human prey. Yet oddly enough they never seemed to go after the Bushman. It was said that the Bushmen smeared themselves with an ointment whose smell so offended the lion's sensitive nose that it would not come near them. But whatever the reason the Bushman would come and go fearlessly and unscathed through lion-country wherein a man armed with a gun was barely safe.

My aunt was more impressed by the Bushman's way with the ostrich. She said he used it, without its knowledge, as his hen and chicken. He never cleared a nest of all its eggs

but always left one for the bird. When I asked the reason she said the Bushman knew that the ostrich, although the greatest in size of all birds was also the stupidest, and so unless he left one egg in the nest to remind it what it was supposed to be doing, it would forget its job and stop laying! She also gave me wonderful imitations of how the hunter covered himself with the wings and feathers of a dead ostrich and then, with the neck and head of the bird held erect by a stick, set out to stalk a flock of birds with inevitable success.

But perhaps my favourite of all the Bushman stories came from a very old ‘Chuana cattle-herder who had been raised in superb giraffe country. I remember him today mainly for two reasons: for the beating I got from one of my elder brothers because one day I addressed that crumpled old body directly by his first name and omitted the respectful ‘old father’ which should have preceded it: and also for this story. The Bushman, this old father told me, knew only too well that all giraffe were women at heart, utterly inquisitive and completely incapable of resisting a pretty thing. Moreover the Bushman knew from long experience what hard and thankless work it could be stalking one who looked down on life from so great a height and out of such far-seeing eyes. So he thought up a wonderful plan. He took out a glittering magic stone he always carried on him and crawled into a bush which was just in sight of a troop of giraffe. He held the stone in his hand in the sun at the side of the bush, constantly turning it in the bright light so that the giraffe could not fail to see it. At first they thought nothing of it, dismissing it as a sparkle of sun on dew, or an effect of the mirage of the heat-mounting distortion and hallucination in the quicksilver light of day. But as the sun climbed higher and this sparkle followed them, so prettily, wherever they moved, they began to get curious. ‘And there little master,’ the old father would always exclaim, ‘the fat was in the fire!’ I could see the giraffe, vivid in the mirror of

the old man’s words, their timid hearts, despite all their other instincts and whatever they had of reason in their shapely Victorian heads, drawn slowly towards the concealed hunter. They would come so near that the Scheherazade pattern in the silk of their clothes would be distinct and visible and their wide slanted eyes, perhaps the loveliest of all animal eyes in the world, would shine behind their long dark lashes like wild honey deep within the comb. For a moment they would stand there in the hypnotic sparkle of so unusual and pretty a thing – and then the Bushman would send his arrows trembling like tuning forks into the tender place below the shoulder because, much as he loved the lard of ‘fat little old aunt sea-cow’, he loved more the marrow in the long giraffe-bone.

Yet with all this hunting, snaring, and trapping the Bushman’s relationship with the animals and birds of Africa was never merely one of hunter and hunted; his knowledge of the plants, trees, and insects of the land never just the knowledge of a consumer of food. On the contrary, he knew the animal and vegetable life, the rocks, and the stones of Africa as they have never been known since. Today we tend to know statistically and in the abstract. We classify, catalogue, and sub-divide the flame-like variety of animal and plant according to species, sub-species, physical property, and use. But in the Bushman’s knowing, no matter how practical, there was a dimension that I miss in the life of my own time. He knew these things in the full context and commitment of his life. Like them, he was utterly committed to Africa. He and his needs were committed to the nature of Africa and the swing of its wide seasons as a fish to the sea. He and they all participated so deeply of one another’s being that the experience could almost be called mystical. For instance, he seemed to *know* what it actually felt like to be an elephant, a lion, an antelope, a steenbuck, a lizard, a striped mouse, mantis, baobab tree, yellow-crested cobra, or starry-eyed amaryllis, to mention only a

few of the brilliant multitudes through which he so nimbly moved. Even as a child it seemed to me that his world was one without secrets between one form of being and another. As I tried to form a picture of what he was really like it came to me that he was back in the moment which our European fairy-tale books described as the time when birds, beasts, plants, trees, and men shared a common tongue, and the whole world, night and day, resounded like the surf of a coral sea with universal conversation.

I do not want to trouble a picture of the beginning with wisdom after the event. But I am trying to articulate now what was then too deep for the powers of expression of a boy on the veld. What drew me so strongly to the Bushman was that he appeared to belong to my native land as no other human being has ever belonged. Wherever he went he contained, and was contained, deeply within the symmetry of the land. His spirit was naturally symmetrical because moving in the stream of the instinctive certainty of belonging he remained within his fateful proportions. Before we all came to shatter his natural state I have never found true evidence that he exceeded his proportions. His killing, like the lion’s, was innocent because he killed only to live. He never killed for fun or the sake of killing, and even when doing it was curiously apprehensive and regretful of the deed. The proof of all this is there in his paintings on his beloved rock for those who can see with their hearts as well as their eyes. There the animals of Africa still live as he knew them and as no European or Bantu artist has yet been able to render them. They are there not as quarry for his idle bow or food for his stomach, but as companions in mystery, as fellow pilgrims travelling on the same perilous spoor between distant life-giving waters. And there is proof too of the balance and rough justice of his arrangements in the fact that when my ancestors landed on the southern tip of the continent three hundred years ago, Africa was nearly bursting its ancient seams with riches of life not found in

any other land on earth. Even I who came on the scene so long after the antique lock was picked and the treasure largely plundered, can still catch my breath at the glimpes I get, from time to time, of the riches that remain. Whenever I do so one vision of the little hunter, who alone is missing from the privileged scene, comes urgently to my mind because it illustrates with delicacy as well as clarity what I am trying to convey of his poignant standing with nature.

The Bushman loved honey. He loved honey with a passion that we, with a sweet-shop on every corner, cannot hope to understand. Bitterness is to the tongue what darkness is to the eye; darkness and bitterness are forms of one another. And the taste of honey to the Bushman was like the light of the fire to his eye, and the warmth of its ruby flame in the black night of Africa. His bees' nests, like his springs and water-holes, were almost the only things in the land about which he felt possessive. He cared for the wild nests and collected his honey from them in such a way that the bees were not disturbed. He knew how to calm and secure a swarm on the wing, and his nests were passed down from father to son. One of the many tragic sights of the closing phase of his history in the country wherein I was born, was the reappearance, at odd moments, in the bed and valleys of the Great River of some wrinkled old Bushman body come from afar to harvest the honey passed on to him by a line of ancestors, only to be shot down in his efforts by some Griqua or European invader. Indeed the taste of the honey on his tongue drove the Bushman to do many reckless things. He would scale great cliffs to get at honey in places where only 'the people who sit on their heels' (as is his dignified name for the baboons) would dare to go. I had one such place pointed out to me which I would not have attempted without rope and climbing boots. Yet the Bushman had climbed it regularly on bare hands and feet, driving pegs of wood for a grip into the fissures of the cliff-face. At the top he had only a narrow ledge on which to

stand while he made his special herbal smoke to drug the bees before he dared reach out for the honey in the hole in the damp overhanging rocks. For the wild bees of Africa are the most formidable bees I have ever encountered. They are smaller than most but quick, fearless, and quite unpredictable. In the village where I was born no hive was allowed by special by-law within four miles of the township because one sleepy summer's afternoon all the bees had carried out a combined operation against everything that moved in the streets and sun-filled courtyards and paddocks. I have forgotten the precise extent of the casualty list but I remember there were two little coloured boys, pigs, hens, sheep, goats, dogs, and several horses among the dead. To this day they, the mosquito, and the tsetse fly, are among the stoutest defenders of ancient rights in Africa. They resent strangers, black as much as white. But for the Bushman they had no such antipathy. They appear to have known from his colour and his smell that he too was part of the necessity of Africa and to have stung him only perfunctorily, as if merely to save their sensitive, jet-eyed, and oddly oriental little faces.

Whenever some disaster overwhelmed his bees the Bushman would set out to look for a new swarm. He would be up early in the morning hoping to find the black water-carrier bees among the dew, and with his eyes would follow them and their silver burden in the slanted light back to their base. Or he would stand still in some fragrant spot at sunset comforted by the tall shadow beside him, and wait for an illumination of wings to draw a bee-line home. It was quite unbelievable, my aunt said, how far those slanted, oddly Mongolian eyes of his could follow the flight of a bee. Long after the European or black man lost sight of it he would still be there marking the flight. When he failed to follow the bee he would go to the spot where the bee had vanished, mark the place, returning the next day and thereafter as long as was necessary to determine the exact

whereabouts of the swarm. But most wonderful of all, he had an ally in a little bird called '*Die Heuning-wyser*', the honey-diviner, who loved honey as much as did the Bushman. It always had its bright little eyes wide open for a nest and whenever it found a swarm at work it would come streaking back, its little wings whirring and starry in the shadows of the trees, to tell the Bushman of its discovery.

'Quick! Quick! Quick! Honey! Quick!' it would sing at the Bushman from the nearest bush, flapping its wings imperiously in the trembling air. 'Quick! Quick!'

At once the Bushman would understand the bird's excited chatter and hasten to reassure it with a melodious call of his own: 'Look, oh, person with wings! Gathering my things and following thee quickly I come.'

When at last he had drawn his amber ration he would never fail to reward the bird with honey and, on a point of mutual honour, share with it the royal portion of the harvest: a comb as creamy as the milk of Devon with its own cream made of half-formed grubs.

And there I must leave them in this moment of fair exchange and communion. I shall return later to the Bushman's relationship with the bees and birds and the significant role which honey, and the bubbling mead he made from it, plays in his spirit. But this seemed to belong here because it came to me in the very beginning, breaking out of the darkness of the past like moon-sparkle blown by the night wind from some startled water, a portion of the glory the Bushman trailed in his nakedness from the God and Africa that were his home.

Now one of the many arguments used by his enemies to show that this little hunter and seeker after honey was really a very inferior person, was precisely the fact that he was utterly dependent on nature. He built no home of any durable kind, did not cultivate the land, and did not even keep cattle or other domestic chattel, and this seemed to prove to his enemies that he was a human 'untouchable'

and not far removed from the beasts of the veld. The Hottentot, a devout pastoralist, the Bantu who was both pastoralist and tiller of the soil, and of course the white man were all rated much higher than the Bushman. Now it is true that the shelters the Bushman built for himself when on the move after game were of the lightest possible structure. Home, for the greater part of the year, was wherever he made a major kill. None the less he had a permanent base on which his whole life swung. In my own part of the country he built round walls of stone, on top of the hills near his permanent waters. The walls were from four to five feet high and according to the local tradition without opening or roof of any kind. At night he would merely climb over the wall, light a fire and cook his food out of the wind, and then curl up by the coals under a blanket of skin. Long after he had vanished from the land it was possible to see, within some crumbling circle of stone, the scorched earth and blackened pebbles where his fires had burnt for centuries. Close by was the hollow he had scratched in the ground to ease the lying for his hips and which was the only bed he ever inherited from his fathers, or passed on to his sons.

I was shown the site of such a permanent base as soon as I could scramble up a hill. It was on the top of the hills at the back of the homestead on my grandfather's immense farm. The lovely place was made more attractive for me by its evocative name: 'Boesmansfontein' – the fountain or spring of the Bushman. This name it possessed already when my grandfather bought the property, so lightly, from its Griqua robbers nearly a century ago, and is enough to show that the fountain once was the permanent water of a Bushman. It came gushing out of the earth in a cleft over-grown and purple with the shadow of blue-bush, Karreetree, wild poplar, and African willow. It was unique among the springs in the area because it gushed simultaneously out of what we called 'Three-eyes', that is to say it had three distinct round openings for the urgent crystal water. The water was

sweet and bubbled in the light with a noticeable rhythm as if somewhere within the earth a caring heart was beating to pump it up to us. As a child who had participated already from birth in my native country's perennial anxieties about water I never looked at it without feeling that I was in the presence of an Old Testament miracle. Yet, more unusual still, barely a quarter of a mile away the water of the spring joined naturally with other permanent waters in the bed of a stream always musical with bird-song and well clothed in silky reeds and tasselled rushes. This stream had the provocative name of 'Knapsack River', but it remains one of the minor disappointments of my life that I have never discovered the answer to the question 'Whose knapsack?' About six miles of this water flowed through my grandfather's farm and both it and the three-eyed fountain made the hills behind an apt site for a permanent Bushman base. It was far enough from the waters not to frighten the game from drinking there, and high enough for the Bushman to observe the movement of the buck below in the plains between the lone blue hills which we called *vlaktes*, and also to allow him to watch on the passes against timely signs of invasion. There the Bushman certainly had neighbours to read his signals of smoke, to join in his celebrations, and help in his troubles.

I remember when I first stood in the broken circle of stone on top of the highest hill, the permanent waters were pointed out to me. In the east, renowned for its bream and barbel and flashing with light lay 'The Long Pool', and not far behind it rose the ridge of red-rock on the edge of a pan of water at a place called 'Setting Sun'. In the north, fifteen miles away, a long hill which rose to the horizon against a sky so polished and shining that its reflection stood upside down upon the hill's summit, marked the water called 'The Fountain of the Shooting', so named after some forgotten incident of our turbulent history. To the west, twenty-five miles away a pinnacle of rock threw a clear shadow on the

edge of the land’s sudden drop into the deep bed of the Great River. Between me and the shadow rose a spire of devout poplar on the rim of the famous water, ‘Great Fountain’; to the south-west, a bare three miles away, but blue already with distance, was a cloud of green curling over the place called ‘Three Fountains’; and due south was a glitter of the water dammed close to ‘The Merchant’s Fountain’. There were other waters in the vicinity as well.

Watching the gipsy swing and flicker of the brilliant buck that remained in the plains mingling with the respectable huddles of imported sheep and cattle in their foreign wool and calico, the view was enough even for a child to realize how well the land had suited the little hunter. And yet there were other places that suited him better still. Wherever possible he preferred to make his home under some huge overhanging rocks, the more inaccessible the better; or best of all within the many caves such as those found not far from my home in the foothills of the Mountains of the Night, the gorges of the Great River, and other cataclysmic rifts in the Dragon ranges.

There the Bushman felt at his safest. There his culture had its greatest continuity and flowering, and there he came to produce the purest form of a truly organic art the continent has yet known. There too, when he had leisure from hunting and hunger, he made his music. No African music, so I was told from all sides, could compare with Bushman music. He had drums, rattles, stringed instruments from a single-stringed fiddle to a harp with four strings. For sounding boxes he clamped the shell of the small veld tortoises on his single-stringed instruments; and for the equivalent of cello and bass violin he used the shell of our big dark mountain tortoises. To this day I am moved by the thought that a tortoise, also, was the inspiration of our European surrealist violins and cellos. For wind instruments the Bushman had flutes made out of a lesser bamboo that grew in our plains and river backwaters, and he played also, I was told, a