Dust Devil

Raymond Foster

African wild dogs do not normally attack people. But in the heat of the chase and the confusion of a whirling dust devil, they could always make a mistake ...

There was really no need for me to go back to Sabande's village. Several years had elapsed since I was last in the area at the behest of the Forest Department, and it really didn't concern me any more. But for once I was travelling as a tourist — not that any *real* tourist would think of going anywhere near such a god-forsaken hole. The mopane bees alone are enough to drive any European visitor round the bend — myriads of tiny creatures that home in on sweat, and swarm over your skin. Slow-flying and stingless they may be, but they crawl endlessly and with maddening persistence into your eyes and ears and up your nose. You used to see people walking around with beekeepers' face-masks made out of mosquito net.

Still, there I was. And the magnificent baobab tree that I remembered was still there, larger than ever, dominating the village compound. Dominating, but not really shading, for at that time of the year as the dry season took hold, nearly all the leaves had been shed, the sun striking the pinkish-grey upper bark obliquely where it swelled, smoothly domed, beneath the tufted witches' brooms which formed the main crown. I am a tree man; but if you love trees as I do, it is quite understandable that the baobab will really captivate you. If you have never stood beneath a giant baobab in one of the great African river valleys in the heat of the day, you cannot imagine how weirdly the light reflects from the limbs, with an almost tangible luminosity.

I was met by Sabande's eldest wife, and she led me back to the baobab, close to where the protuberant root buttresses reached out, the pale bark pleated and twisted in a confusion of bulbous carbuncles. Her young son came too, and gave me a toothy grin while holding onto his mother's skirt possessively.

"We buried him here," she said, pointing. "There are no stones near the village, so we didn't mark the grave."

A playful gust of wind sprang up suddenly, scattering dried skeleton leaves with a rustling noise, then gathering them again and whirling them in a ball against the baobab, scuffling up the dusty sand to leave a shallow depression, and throwing it upwards where the dust seemed to hang suspended like a curtain. Dust devils are common in that area, at that season. This one was only a baby, but it seemed to have a life of its own.

"Serenyoka," said Sabande's wife, laughing.

"Oh," I said. Now 'oh' in those parts means, not just 'oh', but 'oh, is that what it is?'

"Serenyoka," she affirmed, nodding.

Every African family — every one of the old-fashioned traditional kind, at least — has its own attendant totem, whether demon or supernatural beast. If it lives at all, it lives a shadowy life, but enjoys a real and very special relationship,

especially with the head of the household. Sabande was dead, but his own private tourbillion swooped and hovered, gathering fine sand as though trying to take substantial shape.

Perhaps my imagination began to play tricks, but though the suspended dust could scarcely blot out that brilliant sunlight, I seemed to have the vague impression of shaggy fur, misty grey, shading darker at the base like the pelt of a honey badger, hard against the tree.

A giant millipede of the sort everyone affectionately calls 'chungalolo' was winding its way across the compound like a little toy train. Serenyoka whirled across and flicked chungalolo mischievously as though with a dark and dusty paw, sending it spinning back across the clearing in a tightly rolled panicked ball.

The playful whirlwind hit the baobab again, flushing a startled field mouse from its hiding place in the bark. It scuttled out into the open, hesitated, retreated, then re-emerged and darted around the base of the tree. The little boy whooped and gave chase.

The woman looked at me with a chuckle as her son reappeared around the baobab, stuffing the dead mouse into his pocket.

"They're good for the kidneys," she murmured apologetically.

The boy came up and stood on the bare sand that was his father's grave, suddenly serious, then raised his right arm as though in greeting. "You've come back, Ishe," he said, his words welcoming.

His mother smiled at him knowingly, untroubled. "Switi," she said, using Sabande's pet name.

"Yes," I said. It was certainly Switi's voice. "I see you, shamwari; how are you?"

The boy laughed, then turned to his mother, his voice commanding. "Give him the ebony! In my tool box!"

"I hear you, husband," she said.

Released, the boy ran off, unconcerned, revving a make-believe motorbike around the compound.

It happens all the time in Africa. The people believe and expect it, and that is what happens: a dead man speaks through his son's mouth, and no-one raises an eyebrow.

I walked over with her to one of the huts and she invited me in. Then she

reached under a bedstead, drew out a wooden tool box, and opened the lid. We both peered inside. A hatchet, a panga, some spearheads, a few padlocks, a hammer ...

"What are we looking for?"

"Goodness knows," I said, as puzzled as she was. "Ebony ... ebony", it was not a name normally used by local Africans, though the dark-hearted trees were certainly growing there in the valley. I visualized some sort of traditional figurine, lovingly carved ...

"Aha!" I reached into the box and pulled out a battered leather case. "Abney, not ebony! My old Abney level. I wondered what became of it!"

It was a simple little instrument with a hundred and one uses for a busy forester: surveying, aligning traces, measuring heights and slopes; but of not even the vaguest use to Sabande, or anyone else for a hundred miles around. If someone had nicked my compass instead, now that I could understand.

"I expect he found it after you'd gone," she said.

"That's about it," I said. "Very kind of him."

I walked back to my pickup truck and stowed the Abney in my holdall bag, then accepted the good lady's offer of a swig of rupoko beer. Freshly fermented and as thick as gruel, it tasted pretty awful, but it would seem churlish to refuse.

As I re-emerged from the hut a young man came racing down the track on a light motorbike. This is one way in which the face of Africa has changed, away from the towns, I thought. A game scout nowadays would need to know all the local tyre spoors, as well as hooves and paws, bare feet and the ubiquitous sandals made out of old car tyres. The fellow stopped alongside my pickup, and I could hardly believe my eyes when he reached casually over the tailboard, lifted out my holdall, slipped it into a pannier fitted over the rear wheel, and took off again, revving fast along the track.

"Hey, come back! That's my case you've got there ..." I raced to the truck, started up and set off in pursuit. Driving flat out I was gaining fast, but a few hundred yards further on the thief slewed his machine off the track and headed through the trees, following a narrow path.

There was no way I could get the pickup along there, and I pulled up, swearing. I was just about to give up and drive away when another motorbike roared up and stopped. I guessed rightly that this was one of the young men from the village who had seen the crime.

"Come on," he shouted. "We'll catch him!"

It did occur to me then that perhaps I was being set up for a mugging, but I dismissed the thought as unworthy. "Thanks," I shouted back, swinging my leg over the pillion. "Hambai, let's go!"

With a slither of sand we were up the bank and weaving fast through the trees. I used to enjoy a bit of motocross in my youth; we called it scrambling in those days. I braced my legs as we took banks and gullies at speed, bouncing over projecting roots and ducking beneath overhanging branches, slowing once to cross a dry stream bed, balancing precariously on a bridge of fallen tree ferns. It was quite exhilarating.

Before long we had our quarry in sight, and he glanced back, no doubt wondering what to do. I half expected him to pull out my holdall and throw it away, but he didn't. Instead, he swerved off the path and headed up the slope towards the west, into the rays of the setting sun slanting over the hill.

As both bikes gradually climbed out of the valley the vegetation grew sparser and more stunted, with few trees and only scattered clumps of grass and thorn scrub. The sand was looser now, churning heavily beneath our tyres. We were carrying more weight than the other bike, and we floundered a little, the engine labouring. He was still in view, but the gap between us was widening.

We reached the crest of a ridge and the landscape opened up to our right, arid and desolate. Suddenly a magnificent kudu bull appeared from the dazzle, sprang down the slope between the two machines, stood for a second staring, than leaped effortlessly over the bushes, long spiral horns

sweeping his shoulders as he headed for thicker cover deeper in the valley.

The breeze changed direction a little and a minor dust devil sprang up, just as our engine spluttered and faltered. I stepped off as my friend unscrewed the filler cap and peered in, shaking the bike from side to side.

It's okay," he said. "I've got a spare can in the pannier."

At that instant over the clatter of the fast-disappearing bike we heard a strange snickering sound, a weird whinnying, rising and falling, almost fading, then swelling again to a frantic tumult, as a pack of animals came towards us loping across the sand, their silhouettes seeming to flicker menacingly against the glare of the setting sun.

The African wild dog is several worlds apart from our domestic pooch, with its round hyena ears and bone-crushing jaws. Its grotesque pattern of spots and blotches in black and white, brown and yellow, could only have been dreamed up by Old Nick himself.

The miniature whirlwind tore across the ridge in earnest now, blotting out the advancing pack, and my motorcyclist friend covered the open fuel tank with his hand to keep out flying sand. Then as it veered away we thought we could see a dark shaggy shape bounding lightly across the sand, bobbing and weaving just one leap ahead of the leading dogs. Just when it seemed that those jaws would catch and rend their prey, it would spring out of reach, tantalizingly close.

The pack was level with the escaping motorcyclist now, just out of his sight beyond a low bank of grassy sand. He had seen our predicament, however, and was glancing over his shoulder triumphantly, standing on the footrests. But the going was still perilously soft for him, and his tyres were drifting sideways down the slope as they churned, carving dark furrows against the sun.

Suddenly the wild dogs' quarry leapt sideways, up and over the ridge, and the pack leaders swerved violently, skidding in the sand. Then the whole pack wheeled and charged over the hummock as one. We could not quite see what happened to the creature they were chasing, for their sudden change of direction coincided with a wildly funnelling vortex of wind as the dust devil swept down the bank, engulfing the scene in a broad pillar of sand and dead grass.

We heard a roar from the engine, racing wildly before it cut out abruptly. The eerie calls of the pack were frantic now, shrill and piping as they tore their quarry. The whirlwind obscured the scene, mercifully perhaps, for it could not have been pleasant to watch. It seemed to me that the unfortunate man started to run through the sand, crouching low amid a scattering of leaping, spotted shapes, but he was down again almost instantly. His screams turned to a low,

gurgling moan, which ceased after a few seconds. There was nothing we could do but watch, horrified.

After a few minutes the tourbillion abated and the scene became clearer. There was no sign of the motorcyclist who had stolen my case. The wild dogs were still milling around, sniffing and snapping, squabbling over scraps. Then as we watched they trotted away across the sand bank, licking their brown muzzles and chirruping contentedly. We both stood and stared unmoving for a while, the motorcyclist still straddling his machine, filler cap in hand.

At last I stirred myself and said: " I'd better go and take a look."

The motorbike lay on its side, fuel slowly trickling from the cap. Here and there a piece of bone or a ragged scrap of cloth were scuffed into the bank, and a greasy red stain was rapidly disappearing beneath the sand.

My case was still intact, and I pulled it out of the tilted pannier. A few loose objects had fallen out of the pannier too, scattered in the sand, and I picked them up and stowed them in my bag. The machine was already partially buried. A tangle of dry thorn twigs and dead grass had caught against the saddle and stuck, and the evening breeze, much cooler now, was sprinkling sand between the spokes with a faint musical sound.

I retraced my steps to where my friend was refuelling his bike. "He's all gone," I said. "Nothing left. Finished!"

He restarted his machine and we started back, following our own spoor to the path. It was getting dusk as we finally reached the truck. I stowed my holdall in the cab this time, first taking out the loose objects that had fallen out of the pannier. I laid them out on the bank and we inspected them. It was probably the loot from some previous crime. There was a baseball cap, a silk cravat, a pair of trainers, and a necklace or headband of some sort — gold-looking, inset with a large red stone.

"You'd better have these," I suggested. "Unless you happen to know who they belonged to." I pointed to the headband. "That looks as if it might be worth a bit." Then as an afterthought I said: "I think it would be best to keep quiet about the whole thing. The police would bring us nothing but trouble.

My companion nodded as he stowed the things into his own pannier, swung his leg over the saddle and kicked the engine into life.

"Let's say nothing," he agreed. "Who would believe us, anyway?"