KARAKS

Raymond Foster

Karaks is the lepidopterist's name for butterflies of the genus Charaxes. *Most of them are native to Africa. They are remarkable for the speed of their flight, and they spend most of their time in and around the tops of tall trees, making them very difficult to observe. They are very beautiful, like the country which they inhabit. Hardly anything is known about their life cycles, beyond the bizarre fact that some of them have a taste for carrion. We would like to think that butterflies indulge themselves with nectar, not carrion. How does this fit in with the old African superstition about a butterfly that kills by stealth — one that provokes lethal violence, spreading the madness of* chipenga, *and feeds and breeds by way of the outcome of warfare? This story drops a few hints in that direction: is the old superstition true — or could it have at least an element of truth? There is no doubt that this story is true* in parts. *But could it* be wholly *true*?

Aged mother riding shoulders,
Life's possessions on the head,
Chigwendere petals folding
scarlet shroud on nameless dead
Crumpled in the *gwasha* boulders
'Neath *Chigomo* lookout post;
Great samango monkey scolding
lonely disembodied ghost.
Vakumana, fambisai!
Vashe-vashe butterfly.

Flames of waste, *chipenga* madness,
Automatic bullets fly
Bringing death to farmers toiling,
Who can tell the reason why?
unperturbed by sounds of sadness
Feathered feet so gently tapping,
Tiny needle tongue uncoiling.
Pulsing throat the life's blood sapping.
Dzima moto, o dzimai!
Vashe-vashe butterfly.

These strange lines came to me as I lay in bed one morning at dawn, just when the birds were starting to sing. Bird time is as beautiful and peaceful in tropical Africa as it is in other parts of the world. A natural time and place perhaps for *Chimoyo,* the language of the soul.

During the darkest hours we day-creatures sleep, but the night is never really still. Night-apes or bush-babies shriek like banshees in the trees nearby, but we seldom hear them in our sleep. Marauding hyenas call their mournful *Woooo-wup*, but we seldom hear these either. Our ears like the rest of our bodies become attuned to our environment, such adaptable beings are we. But let an unusual, threatening noise so much as murmur, and we are wide awake and listening hard. The soul has ears.

But now nothing more sinister was to be heard than the dawn choir of territorial bulbuls, bush robins, a pair of orioles, a closely harmonized group of bush-shrikes, with a background chorus of doves. And those strange verses which rose unbidden to my lips. Invisible by the bed my dog's tail thumped gently on the rug in appreciation as I whispered the words. When daylight came I wrote them down. They seemed somehow important, though I could not instantly grasp their significance.

Part of these verses is in ChiNdau, the language of the local Ndau people. *Chigwendere* is a climbing shrub — bauhinia or camel's-foot — which grows in these hilly areas, everywhere festooning the edges of evergreen *gwasha* forest with its gorgeous scarlet blossom. *Chigomo* could be any little koppie or rocky hill. *Vakumana* simply means "the boys", or "comrades", and *fambisai* means something like "move them out". *Dzima moto, o dzimai* means "quench the flames", and then, more insistently this time, "quench them". *Vashe-vashe* could be the title of a princess, but it is often used to mean "butterfly", with an extra shade of meaning: the idea of delicate beauty concealing the dangerous authority of a ruthless ruler.

Insurrection was in the air. Africa had decided that the time for independence had arrived, and who could dispute that? It was, after all, their land. In British territories peace had been maintained for at least fifty years "with never a shot fired in anger". Elsewhere, the Portuguese had been in charge for more like five hundred years, and with good reason they claimed some degree of permanence. Should not America, they argued, be handed back to the native American Indians? The whites of America had declared independence for themselves, and the whites of Rhodesia tried the same trick, but it didn't work. Times had changed.

Much the same, of course, had happened in Brazil when they were in a similar situation, and they got their independence. But nobody really believed that the African Territories could pull it off successfully. Hasty arrangements were already being made for those white farmers who wanted to leave to be flown to tiny Portugal, with their eyes fixed, as often as not, on Brazil, that vast land of promise across the ocean. It was foregone. Most of the Portuguese population, including many *assimilados*, and even the local *commandante* and his staff, had packed up and high-tailed it to pastures new.

As if by way of an omen, these events were presaged by an incredible electric storm over the capital, which turned the whole night sky a violent blue-white, flickering for hours on end, glowing orange where continuous sheet lightning bounced off the roofs, filling the air with a sulphureous electric smell. The rest of Africa watched nervously. In the neighbouring territories the whites had already organized themselves into patrols scouting their borders for signs of incursion. There were riots in the towns. Random killings of isolated undefended targets, missionary and farming families, had begun. Things would never be quite the same again.

I happened to live in a rather wild place near the source of the Pungwe River, and I was very familiar with its higher reaches. At eight thousand feet Mount Inyangani sometimes wore a white powdered wig of tropical snow, and oceanic breezes from the east brought frequent rain and mist. From its slopes a slender waterfall plunged thousands of feet to bask in its own permanent misty rainbow.

The Pungwe gorge I thought of as an amazing, secret place, clothed all around in evergreen rainforest. Where the evergreen forest thinned and ran into tall tree heathers, the new-born Pungwe had dug itself into the hillside, a narrow *kloof* dropping several hundreds of feet more through a tangle of scarlet bauhinia and yellow cassia, cool with tree ferns and plantain bananas. A craggy place of aloes and flame lilies, sunbirds, baboons and leopards.

I was living on the western slopes of our hill, but on that day I had business with my Portuguese colleague on the eastern side, below the source of the Buzi River. The hillside was well patterned with stream courses on either side. The margins of these streams, the gullies, and every sheltered patch of rocky hillside, were filled with evergreen *gwasha* forest, and the land between these enclaves was given over to pine plantations, so that the whole hill on either side was clothed with tall trees and evergreen vegetation.

To cross the hill on foot was not far, but it entailed a steep climb, too steep for any vehicle short of a crawler tractor. I reached the top where a path followed the ridge before plunging down on the eastern side. I headed fast downhill towards the dirt track that would take me to Jorge's house.

Wherever the sun pierced the tree crowns, with a patch of sky brilliant against the dark evergreen leaves, small clouds of butterflies whirled and chased with the light on their wings. I could see they were of the type known as Charaxids, or karaks — perhaps the prototypical butterfly of the African evergreen forests. If you are thinking of netting some you'll find them a great challenge. The only reliable way to do it is to catch them drinking at ground level. Some of them love to suck the sap that oozes from any small wound on a tree. Some again enjoy overripe bananas. Others prefer stronger juice, and descend on dung, or carrion. You can set a trap for them quite easily by using a bait of their favourite tipple in a clearing.

I noticed a piece of fresh monkey dung lying beneath a tall tree. I could see where it had bounced off the root buttress as it fell, and sure enough, a karaks was there, sampling the flavour. As I watched three more danced in, wings flashing orange and blue, to join the feast.

I wished I had brought my net and equipment. I had a fair selection of karaks at home, but these, to me, were a great rarity. I had one specimen that I was pretty sure belonged to the same species, and I was fairly certain too that the species was as yet unnamed. Yet, evidently, here were clouds of them, scouting the treetops with their oddly eccentric flight, now dawdling in curiosity, now accelerating away with an amazing burst of speed, chasing other insects or even small birds that happened to fly past. There was still a lot to learn about the whole genus. Hardly anything was known about their juvenile stages, and nothing at all about their larval food plants.

Like me, Jorge do Carmo was a keen observer of wildlife; but not only that. He was also one of the greatest of experts, living or dead, on the lepidoptera of the evergreen forest areas between the Banti Forest escarpment and the slopes of Gorongoza, including the river courses of the Pungwe and the Buzi. His collection of Charaxids was worthy of the hidden vaults below the British Museum of Natural History in London.. As I sat drinking his coffee I mentioned the karaks I had seen. It seemed to me, I said, that they had suddenly and mysteriously increased in number.

Jorge looked at me seriously for a while without speaking. Then, still without speaking, he rose, crossed the room to one of his storage cabinets and opened a drawer. I walked over and stood at his shoulder. The Charaxid colour range gleamed startlingly from the dark wood, like sunlight above the trees, from white through yellow and tawny brown to sheerest blue and jet black. I gazed into the drawer, fascinated. He pointed to the two final rows of twin-tailed karaks, and glanced at me quizzically.

I nodded. "That's the one all right," I said. "Has it been named?"

"It has now," he said. "I believe I was the first to describe the species, and I submitted a name which has just been approved."

"Well, all the other karaks seem to have classical-sounding names," I mused, surveying the insect ranks. "We have *achaemenes, saturnus, xiphares, candiope, castor ...* I can't wait to hear what you've come up with."

"Ah, my choice is more meaningful, I think. But I shall keep you guessing for a minute longer. Come out here."

He led the way out of the back door and into his little garden on the edge of the trees, where some fly-proof breeding cages had been set up. There was also a rather nasty pong in the air, and I puffed involuntarily. Instead of the food plants which I had been expecting to see, each cage contained an unidentifiable gobbet of rotting flesh.

Jorge poked at one of these foul objects gently with a piece of stick, exposing a seething mass of black and orange caterpillars all feeding voraciously. I had never seen anything quite like them before. *Were* they lepidoptera, I wondered?

"They'll be pupating soon," said Jorge. "And now — do you want to know that name?"

"Go on!"

"*Charaxes necrophagus,"* he announced triumphantly. "The flesh-eating karaks!"

I stared in bewilderment. "And these.."

"Yes, these are *necrophagus* larvae!" After pausing for effect, he continued: "Haven't you cottoned on yet? You've heard of *chipenga,* haven't you?"

Of course I had. Insurrections and killings were often spoken of as *chipenga.* I suppose you could translate it as "a touch of madness".

"And have you not heard the old story of the butterfly that bites, the butterfly that spreads madness?"

Again, of course I had. It is one of Africa's favourite stories. But I had always thought of it as an old wife's tale, like snakes that fly.

Jorge led me back indoors, opened an insect-relaxing case and took out a limp specimen. "Got your magnifier? Good." He uncoiled the tongue with a setting needle. "This is the male," he said. "See anything unusual?"

I peered closely through the glass. "No," I said at last. "It looks perfectly normal to me."

"Right. Now here's the female. Look at the tongue again."

I studied it minutely. "Good lord!" I exclaimed. "It's a piercer!"

The tip of the flexible tongue was chitinous and sharp. I replaced the insect in the case and closed the lid, waiting for Jorge to explain, but he led me to his bedroom and showed me a crumpled mosquito net.

"Do you use one of these?"

"No," I said. "There are no mosquitoes where I live."

"Nor are there here," he said. "But I wouldn't sleep without a net these nights, and neither should you." He shook the material, ejecting the broken remains of a female *necrophagus.* "She must have got tangled up some time during the night, and then got squashed when I folded it back this morning."

I suddenly remembered the poem that had come to me that morning, and mentioned it. It was starting to make sense.

"Snap!" Jorge said. "Here is a poem about butterflies that has just come to me."

It was a gruesome little parody of a Portuguese nursery rhyme, which I would rather not translate. I think it went like this:

As borboletas,
Tão engraçadas,
Fazem seus ninhos
Dentro dos soldados

I shuddered. It was not a very nice thought. I could see what he was getting at, but I was still sceptical.

"There's no doubt about it," said Jorge. "Just think of all the insect-vected maladies in Africa — in the world. Not only the parasitic diseases like malaria and sleeping sickness; blood disorders need only the tiniest sharing of blood in order to spread. Diseases like

bubonic plague, pernicious anaemia, hepatitis, or slim — any one of these could take off as never before."

(Unless I am greatly mistaken, the somewhat obscure medical condition known to Africans as "slim" or "bones" has since become widespread and notorious as AIDS).

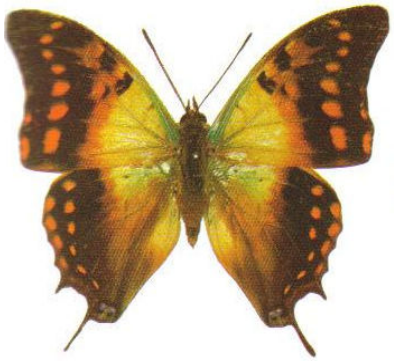
"*Chipenga* is spread by the adult female *necrophagus,"* Jorge went on. "She flies at dusk, attracted by the human presence, and settles nearby. When all is still, she creeps forward slowly, guided perhaps by the breath, feeling for a pulse with the front feet. And then..." He left the rest to my imagination.

"And the larval feeding habits?"

"Well, you've seen for yourself. Look, my friend — violence breeds violence; madness breeds madness. It's difficult to find out for sure, but this karaks probably needs human blood before it can breed successfully, like so many other blood-sucking insects. But it depends too on a plentiful supply of suitable fresh carrion. Normally in Africa, with that sort of life cycle, the species would not stand much of a chance. The competition is too intense. Carrion very soon gets cleared up. So, first of all, food material needs to be in plentiful supply. Then it needs to be well hidden, as it is in thick forest. It will help if there is some sort of ongoing disturbance, enough to keep scavengers away from the area."

"As there is in warfare," I interrupted.

"Exactly. And finally, the carrion needs to lie on stony ground so that burying beetles can't dispose of it — or at least it needs to be too large for them to bury. It's a cycle within the balance of nature. *Chipenga* means *necrophagus,* and *necrophagus* means *chipenga.* When everything is peaceful, and nature is working normally, this karaks is a very rare insect indeed. I've been trying to find out if this population is strictly local, or if it has migrated south and east across the Zambezi from the Congo — or Zaire, or whatever we should call it now. It also occurs I am fairly sure in Rwanda Burundi, and probably Uganda too. But field work at this time is almost impossible. Entomology and warfare don't mix.



I was silent as I pondered on these revelations.

"And, just a thought," Jorge added. "There are very similar species in the evergreen forests of south-east Asia, especially in Vietnam and Cambodia. It makes you think, doesn't it!"

Jorge led the way outside again and to the back of the house where, beneath the raised floor, a length of hosepipe from his water tank had been arranged so as to drip onto a piece of sacking to form a primitive but effective cooler.

He pulled the sack aside, lifted out one of several small metal cases and unclipped it. It was packed with dry leaf mould and, as I could see when he gently sifted the stuff through his fingers, several dozen golden chysalids, wriggling their tails weakly in response to the disturbance.

"The fact is," he went on, "I have no choice now but to get out. The department is flying me out in a day or two. I've already got a job lined up in Brazil, and there is no reason why I shouldn't take my work with me." He closed the case and handed it to me. "But I want you to take these. Without live specimens I really don't see how we can study the problem. Perhaps you can rig up a cage and experiment, or get them to some authority that knows what it's doing. At all events, good luck with them!"

My dog, who had been waiting patiently by Jorge's front door all this time, jumped up and shook herself ready for off. Jorge insisted on running us up the track in his jeep, to drop us off at the most convenient point for the walk over the hill. To drive all the way would involve so roundabout a route that it would have taken most of the day. We made our farewells in the forest and I set off up the hill for home, clutching the precious case. It was the last I saw or heard of Jorge do Carmo.

I knew the area as well as anyone, and walked fast slantwise up the slope. A troop of vervet monkeys swung in the branches above our heads, teasing the dog by making as though to jump down within reach and scolding her with their coughing cries. This, I thought, was all in play, but way down the slope a samango monkey — a much larger and warier beast — began to bark angrily, and a pair of louries set up a raucous din. I was sure that this signalled some sort of human intrusion not far below me, and as I reached the shelter of a bushy cliff face I craned my neck to see through a gap in the trees.

I caught a glimpse of an untidily uniformed man, then another, and another following in single file. There could well be a whole column of them moving our way, and as they were obviously not official troops they were likely to be unfriendly.

It would probably prove unhealthy to stay, and unwise to run. They seemed to be following a path that climbed to intersect with my own route, and I and the dog would certainly be seen if we continued up the slope.

I gestured to my dog to stay close, and looked around for a suitable hiding place. These were keep-your-fingers-crossed times in this border country, and I preferred not to take unnecessary chances. As if they knew what was happening, the vervets disappeared quietly into the *gwasha*, and I pressed close to the thicket clothing the rocks, crouching among the thick vegetation.

As I pushed deeper into cover and shook the bushes a little, bauhinia petals started to fall like memorial day poppies, and I wondered then if it was my own death I had been foretelling with that morning's dawn chorus. Then somewhat to my relief I found a gap

concealed between the boulders. Grabbing the dog's collar I squeezed through and pulled her in after me. It was almost pitch black inside, and from the atmosphere of the place I judged it to be a fairly sizeable cave. I tapped my dog gently on the nose to keep her quiet, and waited.

When I reckoned the danger must have passed, I struck a match. I was right: the cave extended into shadows as far as the flickering flame allowed me to see, and I was about to explore when a splash of colour on the rock wall close to my elbow caught my eye. Ancient creatures seemed to stir and stretch their legs as the match burnt out. Hurriedly I lit another.

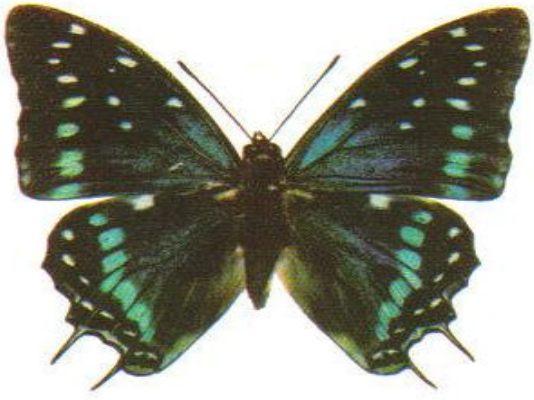
Before me was a hunting scene. Men with spears surrounded eland, instantly recognizable by the characteristic rake of their horns, and sable antelope, vividly patterned. I was convinced that these were pre-Bantu rock paintings. The colours were as bright as they had probably been, centuries before. The figures of men were plainly naked. But further along the smooth rock another group of men was depicted, also armed with spears, and these appeared to be wearing clothes of some sort, with spiky trappings around the waist, and each wore a tall headdress.

It was the shape and colour of the headdresses that had me staring, fascinated, until my last match burnt out. They seemed to be of stylized design, like twin crescents glowing blue and orange. As I shook my empty matchbox I seethed with the frustration of it. I was positive that I knew what those headdresses had represented: *chipenga,* and the karaks that carried it! The wings of that butterfly of death, *Charaxes necrophagus.*

Feeling that I was on the brink of a major scientific discovery, I resolved to return as soon as possible with a lantern. I peered out of the cave cautiously, squinting in the light. Then, finding it all clear, I eased myself through the gap and into the open, taking care this time not to shake the overhanging vegetation. Satisfied that all was quiet, I let the dog come out too and we walked quicker than before up and over the hill.

Back home I put the case of chrysalids into my meat cooler — a large earthenware jug with a piece of cloth over the top, standing in the furrow which fed my hot water tank (a forty-gallon drum on stilts, with a place for a fire underneath). Then I rang the nearest store and ordered enough mosquito netting to rig up a breeding cage. I didn't want the butterflies emerging before I was ready for them. I figured I could drive over to the store and pick up the netting the following morning.

That evening as I came home and parked the Land Rover my cook came out to meet me. "Mambo," he said. "There's a boss come to see you. I let him in and made him some tea".



I went in, expecting to see some forestry official, or perhaps a local farmer, but my visitor turned out to be a complete stranger. He introduced himself, a dapper little man smartly dressed in a tropical suit.

"I'm with the World Health Organization," he said. "I've been doing some work based at the clinic in Chigozi." He named a Ndau village about twenty miles away. "It's all finished now. I'm due to fly out to New York tomorrow morning. I was heading for the main road when my car broke down at the end of your track." He pointed vaguely through the window. "My driver's waiting in the car. If I could phone a garage..."

I picked up the phone and rang the garage at Masikesi. "What do you reckon the trouble is?" I asked as we waited.

"I'm not sure. Something electrical, I think."

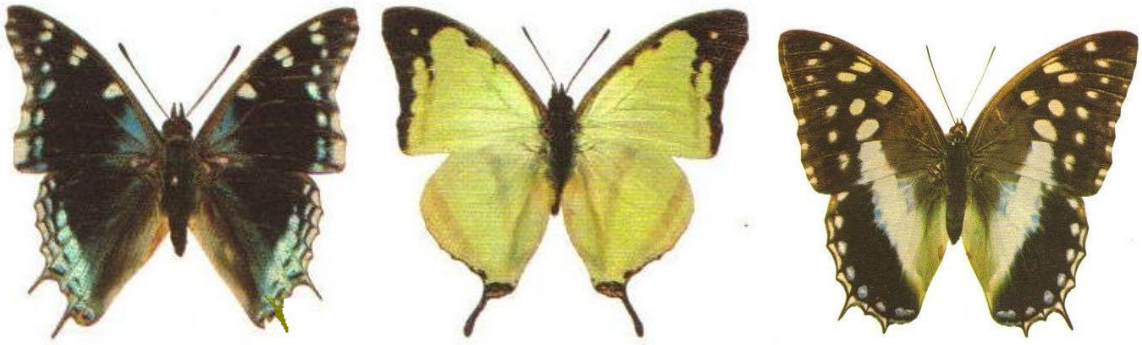
I handed the phone over to him as the mechanic responded. "Here," I said. "You'd better tell him yourself."

The mechanic listened, diagnosed the fault on the spot, and promised to arrive in about an hour. My guest put the phone down.

"Well," I said. "Let's have a drink while you're waiting."

He hesitated before sitting down and pointed apologetically to a small case standing by the door. "I've got some vaccine in there. Is there any chance of keeping it somewhere cool?"

My cook was at his most attentive as he brought the WHO official a drink. "I'll see to it, Mambo," he said as he whisked the case away. I didn't like to mention that we had no fridge.



So we sat and chatted for an hour or so, mainly of course about the political changes going on all around. Then my cook brought the case back and I drove my visitor up the track. We met the mechanic already on his way down to fetch us.

"All fixed, boss," he said. "I've fitted a new coil." He made out an invoice, the fellow paid up, and that was an end of the matter. He thanked me, and continued on his journey to the airport.

A couple of days later, after I had picked up my mosquito netting, I spent an hour or

two constructing a breeding enclosure. Eventually it would need to be strong enough to keep out scavengers attracted by the smell of rotting meat — but that stage was some way in the future. At present all I needed was some leaf mould to shelter the chrysalids until they emerged, and I dug up a sackful of the stuff. Then I went to my cooler and retrieved Jorge's case, carried it back to my newly made cage, and opened it up.

Instead of leaf mould and chrysalids, I found myself staring at a neatly packed row of phials, swabs and syringes, and some WHO forms. I swore loudly as the truth sank in. It *did* look very like the case my cook had taken to keep cool beneath the damp cloth in my meat cooler. I was still muttering and cursing to myself when an unfamiliar sound like distant thunder echoed through the hills, and with an uneasy feeling in my stomach I realized that it was gunfire — repeated short bursts of automatic fire.

I felt very helpless at that moment, and also a bit of a fool. Not least of my worries was a growing doubt about whether I should be able to get back to the cave to take some flashlight photos, as I had intended. I felt the whole project slipping away.

The phone rang and I went back indoors. It was the local operator. "I have an international person-to-person call for you from New York," she said. "I'll put you through..."

The voice of that dapper little man, several thousand miles away on the other end of the line, said: "I hope I've got the right person..."

"Yes, I'm afraid you have," I admitted. "I've got your case. I just found out about it a few minutes ago. Terribly sorry about that. I'll get it on the plane to you first thing tomorrow. What's your address?" He gave me the address of a WHO laboratory in New York and I wrote the information down.

"I'm afraid I have some very sad news concerning *your* case," he said. "When I arrived in New York I had to deliver the vaccines to that laboratory in Fifth Avenue, so I was carrying what I thought was my case, and as it was a pleasant day I thought I'd stretch my legs after the flight and take a stroll through Central Park. But unfortunately I got mugged, and these two young black boys grabbed my case. I told them it was full of infectious organisms to try and put them off, but of course they opened it up there and then, and to my amazement a great cloud of butterflies flew out. I had to think fast, so I shouted: 'Don't let them get on you — they're deadly!' and the two muggers took to their heels."

I had to chuckle, despite the seriousness of the situation.

"The butterflies all flew up into the trees," he continued. "There was nothing left but leaf mould and empty chrysalids. Obviously I've ruined some sort of breeding program which you had on the go; but I must say, it wasn't really my fault! I shall of course return the case if..."

"No, please don't bother to return the case," I interrupted him. "I shan't put you to that trouble, and the situation being what it is, I shall probably not be staying here much longer, myself."

There was more gunfire as I spoke, and as I put the phone down I began to make plans for my departure. I have never been one to outstay my welcome.