

The Leopard and the Antelope

Raymond Foster

1 *A new beginning*

When independence came to Makaranga, Alexander Fearn lost his job as warden of Chikita Forest Reserve, and he moved with his family to England. He fixed himself up with a post in the local government department quite easily, but now it was his daughter Valezina's turn to look for a job.

The job centre in the High Street was a depressing place at the best of times, and the dull weather on this mid-week morning aggravated the all-pervading sense of gloom. Needless to say, none of the jobs on offer promised to be even vaguely suitable, and Valezina soon stopped reading the information in any meaningful way. Frankly now, she was simply sheltering from the rain.

The few other people hanging around inside looked as dejected as Valezina felt, and they too were skipping over the employment cards with minimal enthusiasm. They included two or three school-leavers; a punk rocker with bright green hair, worked into dangerous-looking spikes; and a rather pretty black girl who, at first glance, seemed to be studying the office vacancies but, as her glazed look of abstraction showed, was really gazing right through the panel, her thoughts elsewhere.

Near the door a young executive type, wearing a smart raincoat, was casting frequent glances through the glass at the raindrops bouncing high on the grey road. Perhaps, she thought, he wanted to avoid getting his new coat wet.

Valezina herself stood, slouching a little, with one hand on the job display board, now stifling a yawn with the other. Then she noticed how badly she was standing, and consciously straightened herself up a little. Her mother was forever criticizing her about her posture at home. She blamed her height, of course, for she was a lanky girl with a natural slimness many would find enviable – and an animal vitality that showed itself in her dark eyes and finely moulded features.

The rain started to ease off at last, and Valezina moved slowly to the doorway and peered through, feeling the mugginess of the atmosphere in her breathing. She stood hesitating with the door open for a few minutes, until one of the women who worked in the building came and stood behind her, wanting to pass.

"Excuse me," the woman said. "Come on, love. This isn't a bus shelter, you know..."

"I'm sorry."

Valezina stood aside to let the woman through; then she pulled the hood of her anorak up to cover her long tawny-brown hair, and stepped down onto the pavement.

The rain eased still more and stopped bouncing on the tarmac, though the water was still running in torrents along the gutters. Then the sun broke through briefly and set the road gleaming, its surface shot here and there with the rainbow colours of floating oil which had dripped, perhaps, from beneath cars while they waited for the lights to change. Valezina crossed the road, thankful that she was wearing her old jeans.

Two hundred yards nearer home the heavens opened again, and the rain started to come down in sheets, making her cower in a doorway. As it happened, a little café was a couple of doors away, and she fumbled in her pockets to see if she had enough small change to buy a cup of tea. Then she sprinted the short distance to the café door, ducked beneath a waterfall spattering down from the overflowing guttering somewhere high on the building, and went inside with a rush, her head down.

Most of the customers already in the café seemed to be there for refuge rather than refreshment, and were sitting hunched gloomily over their tea, coffee or coke, watching the pouring rain. She picked her way to the tea-splashed counter, ordered a cup and carried it to a table by the window. How very nice it would be, she mused, to be able to spend a week or two in some sunnier clime, whenever the fancy took her. Valezina had been born and brought up in the forestlands of central Africa, but seven years had passed since she came with her parents to live in England, and her childhood days now seemed more like some former life, remembered briefly only in dreams.

The noise of water splashing onto the pavement from the faulty gutter stopped suddenly, and Valezina looked out hopefully. The rain seemed to have eased off again, and a few pale rays of sunlight broke through the clouds and shone slanting on the glass. A rather smart businessman who had obviously been sheltering from the rain picked up his briefcase and strode to the door.

Valezina watched him go idly, then noticed that he had left his newspaper on the table. Casually she reached across and picked it up, opened it and skipped through the pages until she came to the situations vacant columns, where she began to study the contents more thoroughly. Perhaps it had become second nature to her – to read the details of available posts, and the qualifications required, even though most of them were quite irrelevant: engineers, scientists, executives ... Then she came across one which aroused her interest, and she went over the details again and again:

Zoological Society Gardens, it read. The Director is seeking a zoological assistant for practical duties including overseas travel. Qualifications: preferably a degree in zoology or related sciences; alternatively appropriate educational CV coupled with relevant practical experience. Then it gave the address and telephone number of the Director's office at the zoo.

Valezina did not have a degree, needless to say. Nor did she have much in the way of educational qualifications. But – and perhaps far more importantly – she did have the practical experience of working with live, wild animals, albeit far away and long ago.

Some of her happiest memories were of the various orphaned creatures that were reared in their garden, and which she herself had helped tend and feed.

Perhaps it was silly to apply for the job, she thought – but, surely, it was no more silly than drifting hopelessly into the job centre each week, steadily lowering her sights until she was ready to accept the meanest offer anybody might deign to make. It really looked quite bright outside now, and satisfied that the rain had withdrawn its threat, she rolled the paper up tightly and made for the door.

At home Valezina got out the writing materials and made out her application immediately, composing it carefully so as to emphasize her background and early experiences in Africa, glossing over her age at the time and her lack of involvement since. When she had it all written out, even at her most down-to-earth she could see that she had made herself sound quite a suitable candidate, after all. She rewrote it several times to get it just right before sealing it up; then she went out again to post it.

Her mother wanted to know all about it, of course, and Valezina opened the paper and pointed out the advert.

"Oh, Val ... that's hardly your type of job, is it," she said, discouragingly. "You wouldn't want to work in the zoo, would you? It's more a job for your father, I should think."

Valezina's father already had a reasonably well-paid job – something to do with Tree Preservation Orders, as far as she understood it, and she pointed out this obvious fact. "Besides," she went on. "I can just about afford the stamp, so what's the harm in applying?"

Her application must have made her seem a reasonably credible candidate, because a few days later she received a reply, asking her to attend an interview in seven days time.

Valezina had been to too many unsuccessful interviews to entertain much hope of success for this one. She had started to feel that the pattern of automatic rejection was already set: but, as it turned out, this pessimistic approach was not a bad thing, for it ensured that she did not allow her enthusiasm to run away with her. When the day of the interview arrived, therefore, she was neither over-eager nor in the least bit nervous at the prospect.

At the appointed hour she presented herself at the zoo gates, where the attendant glanced at her without much interest.

"One pound fifty, please," he said, his hand poised to tear a ticket from the roll.

Valezina explained about the interview, and the man reached for a telephone in the office behind the ticket cubicle, and spoke to someone briefly. Then he opened the door and came out, releasing the click-gate as he did so, and pointed out the building where the interviews were being held.

"Just go through that doorway over there, miss," he said, more politely now.

Valezina walked across the open space towards the director's office. Through the doorway a middle-aged receptionist was sitting at a desk; she took Valezina's name and showed her into a room where three other people were already waiting. Two of these were men, and the third was a woman, but she had no way of knowing how many applicants had already been seen, or how many were yet to come. She smiled at them without speaking and sat down, then studied them guardedly but with interest.

The woman was a good deal older than Valezina, weather-beaten and somewhat leathery-looking. Valezina fancied that she would have long experience of life in the raw, plus a doctor's degree in zoology at the very least.

She turned her attention to the male competition. One of the men was an indoor type, guessing from his appearance, young, pale and studious. The other man, scarcely older than Valezina, was just the opposite: an outdoor adventurer if ever there was one, the type who might be found canoeing down some Himalayan river. He looked over-confident, she thought, as though he had persuaded himself that the job was already his, and Valezina rather disliked the idea of the job going to so cock-sure a person.

Just then somebody put their head round the door and called a name, and the studious young man got up quickly and disappeared into the inner sanctum. The others relaxed again, and settled down to wait their turn. A few scientific zoological journals were lying on the table, and Valezina reached forward idly and picked one up, thinking it might help to prevent her developing nerves just when she was feeling confident.

She flicked through the pages without their contents registering very deeply on her mind. Then something caught her eye, and she turned back a couple of sheets. It was a report on the wildlife of that part of Africa that she had known so intimately as a child. Apparently some important project was under way there.

At first she skipped through the facts and figures lightly, merely looking for details she thought might be of some use to her during the imminent interview. But as she read, it gradually dawned on her that this was a matter very dear to her heart; what had up to now been no more than a job-hunter's ploy was starting to become a crusade.

The place under discussion was Chikita Forest, which had been part of the area patrolled by her father as forest and game warden. Chikita was an isolated patch of primeval evergreen jungle – an oasis of tall rainforest set mysteriously amid many miles of desert-dry bush country. This marvellous place sheltered its own particular kinds of birds and beasts some of which were quite unique – different in appearance, behaviour and food requirements from all the related species to be found over Africa.

Apparently, so the article said, the government of Makaranga had started to fell the trees in this place, with plans to turn the land to agricultural use, despite protests from conservationists in other parts of the world. As she read, Valezina found herself becoming more and more indignant. Memories came flooding back. Their family bungalow had been on the fringe of this forest, and she recalled a baby blue duiker that she had helped to hand-rear after its mother had been caught in a poacher's snare. This tiny antelope would probably become extinct if the government's plans went ahead, and the same fate would befall all the other beasts and birds which depended for their

individual survival on the survival of Chikita Forest as a whole.

Somebody looked round the door again and called another name, at which the gaunt lady got to her feet and went through; but now Valezina scarcely noticed – she was engrossed in this account of the wildlife of that far-off place, beautiful creatures whose plight was a matter of concern only to a handful of conservationists. By the time the second young man's name was called, Valezina had almost forgotten the reason why she was there – and in no time at all, it seemed, it was her turn to go in. She answered her name with a start, put the magazine down hurriedly, and followed the secretary into the interview room.

The director's office was pleasantly light and airy, with a wide window overlooking the zoo gardens. The first thing that caught her eye as she went in was an enormous and fascinatingly beautiful painting of a crouching leopard, hung directly behind the long table which filled the centre of the room. Three people were sitting behind the table, and they looked at Valezina expectantly. A solitary leather armchair, obviously intended for her, was set in front of the table.

Facing her, the chair to her right was occupied by a middle-aged, balding man who looked at her kindly. His suit, rumpled in a homely way, was of quiet grey and brown, but his waistcoat was a bright canary yellow – a combination which gave him the look of a 'character'.

At the other end of the table sat a young woman of very striking appearance. Catching her eye, Valezina glanced involuntarily at the painting which had first caught her attention, for this woman seemed to reflect the qualities of a leopard, sleek, beautiful, immaculately groomed and expensively clad, with golden hair that matched a suntanned complexion, and dangerously fearless golden-green eyes.

A young man who had been sitting in the central chair stood up as Valezina approached, and gestured for her to take a seat. Valezina noticed that he was tall and slim, with powerfully broad shoulders. He had the sort of chin that always looked dark, even when newly clean-shaven, and his eyes were deep blue. His dark hair contrasted with the golden crowning glory of the leopard-woman on his right, and the rather pink bald pate of the academic figure to his left, so that the three together made a colourful group.

Valezina smiled and said: "Good afternoon!"

"Good afternoon. Miss Fearn, isn't it?"

"Yes. Valezina Fearn."

"My name is Philip Scott. I'm the zoo director." He indicated the golden woman by his side. "This is Petronella Tass, one of our curators. And this ..." he turned to the other man, "...is Professor Adrian Trumpet. You've probably heard of him?"

It was a name not easy to forget, but Valezina had not heard it before. Nevertheless she nodded confidently, and smiled at the professor. The introductions over, the director began to explain what would be required of Valezina, if she got the

job. Before long he was talking about her prospective duties on trips abroad, and when he mentioned Chikita Forest she leaned forwards eagerly. Apparently a visit was already planned for the near future, even if unable to prevent the agricultural program, at least to rescue as much of the wildlife as they could.

"You look interested in that project ... have you any particular views you'd like to put forward ...?"

Valezina launched off into an account of her childhood at Chikita, and her great love for the forest creatures – especially for the little blue duiker, and the other antelopes they had reared. The director was plainly fascinated and, every time she paused, prompted her to go on. The professor also added a word here and there, and questioned her when she paused again.

"I expect you remember Stevenson's samango monkey?"

Valezina did not know the name, and she hesitated. There had been several different species of monkey in Chikita. The leopard-woman hunched her shoulders a little as she watched Valezina, like some giant cat watching a mouse – or a leopard watching an antelope.

"Well ... there was that big noisy monkey we used to call 'kondo' ..."

"Kondo!" exclaimed the professor. "That is the local dialect name for the species. Do you speak the local African tongue, Miss Fearn?"

Strangely enough, Valezina had not thought of that before. It had never occurred to her to mention that she was in fact fluent in the local language spoken around Chikita.

"Well, yes. You see, I always used to play with the African children ..."

The professor was clearly entranced. He turned to his colleagues and said: "I think we need look no further – what do you say?"

Philip Scott smiled at Valezina warmly and said: "We are very impressed, Miss Fearn! What do you say, Petronella?"

The leopard-woman smiled too, but her smile was cold as she riffled through the papers on the table in front of her.

"Now let me see," she said, doubtfully. "Just to recap ..., you don't have a university degree, do you – ah, no. School A levels then – oh, you don't actually have any of those either. I see. Well then, coming to your previous employment ..." she turned the papers over in mock puzzlement. "I don't seem to have any record of that?"

Valezina smiled at her sweetly, her temper rising, but well under control. "I'd like to make it perfectly clear," she said. "I have four O levels, but no other educational qualifications. As for previous employment, I've been unable to get a proper job since leaving school, so I've no experience to offer, either."

"Quite!" said Petronella Tass.

Then the professor spoke again. "In my opinion, Miss Fearn has more relevant experience than all the other applicants put together," he said. "And as for education – why, she actually speaks the native language, and what's more, she has learnt to care for the wild animals of Chikita, both in and out of their natural environment. What more could we possibly ask?"

Philip Scott looked around the table, still smiling. "Well, it seems we have one in favour, and one against," he said. "As chairman of this interview board I have the casting vote; so ..." he stood up, reached over the table and took Valezina by the hand, his deep blue eyes crinkling warmly as they met hers. "Welcome to our staff, Miss Fearn, I hope you will be very happy with us!"

"Thank you very much. I'm sure I shall," said Valezina, knowing that she meant what she said.

Petronella Tass was smiling too, as a leopard might smile to itself in the forest, knowing that its day will come; but Valezina had won the first round, and she walked out of the room with a spring in her step.

* * *

On the morning Valezina was due to start work at the zoo, the weather was blissfully bright and sunny. She set off in good time, and when she arrived the main gate was still closed. She looked around for a few minutes before finding a staff entrance a little way down the road. This was unlocked, and she went in. Almost immediately she bumped into the ticket attendant, who paused in his stride, then said: "Oh, good morning miss. I thought I recognized you!"

She crossed to the director's office, where a middle-aged woman was hanging up her coat; it was the receptionist she had seen when she arrived for the interview, and they smiled and shook hands.

"Welcome to the zoo, my dear. Join the animals! Mr Scott is already in his office, if you'd like to go in."

Valezina tapped on the door and went in. Philip Scott was alone on this occasion, and Valezina's heart skipped a beat as he put his pen down and stood up with a welcoming smile. The sinister but beautiful portrait of the leopard looked down at her from above his head, its eyes seeming to watch her every move.

"Good morning, Miss Fearn. May I call you Valezina?"

"Good morning, sir. Yes, of course you may."

"And you must call me Philip!" He walked round to the front of his desk and led her to the door. "First things first, Valezina. I'd better show you around the zoo now, while everything's reasonably quiet."

The director showed her the various facilities, and introduced her to any of the staff they chanced to meet, including several keepers and the head keeper.

As the director's assistant, Valezina found that she had become quite an important person at the zoo. In one stride, it seemed, her status had risen from that of an out of work no-hoper, to a respected executive. At last they completed the circuit, and arrived back at the office.

"We are off to Makaranga next week," Philip explained. "Just you, me, Petronella and the professor. I know it doesn't give you much time to get ready. How are you fixed for a passport and everything?"

"That's all up to date."

"Splendid. And, of course, there's no need for me to tell you what you'll need in the way of clothes, and so on. I expect you know a great deal more about that sort of thing than I do! All the travelling costs will be covered by the society, of course – but I'd better arrange for you to get your first month's salary in advance, to help you cover any extra expenses."

The next few days passed very quickly as Valezina accustomed herself to her routine duties at the zoo. The side of the job she liked best was the animal clinic – a department that concerned itself not only with animals that chanced to become sick, but also with the hand-rearing of young ones unfortunate enough to have been abandoned by their mothers soon after birth.

Petronella Tass did not normally work at the zoo; but as an important member of the board she frequently put in an appearance, and it was at the animal clinic that their paths chanced to cross one morning, a couple of days before they were due to leave the country. Valezina had called in to check on the progress of a litter of leopard cubs, and Petronella was already there, sitting on the floor, petting them.

"Good morning, Miss Tass," said Valezina cheerfully as she came in. She smiled when she saw the cubs. "Aren't they beautiful?"

"Yes, indeed they are. All the cats are beautiful – but one has to know how to handle them, Valezina. It's all a question of empathy – of knowing how their feline minds work. I must say, you don't look like a cat person; I'm surprised you like cats, Valezina!"

"I think all young animals are attractive, of course. But I must admit that I do find cats, well – ruthless."

"And you are right! It is the business of cats to be ruthless, isn't it. After all, they have to be professional killers in the wild."

At that moment, Valezina saw that Petronella, besides playing with the leopard cubs, was holding another animal in her hand. She gasped in horror as she recognized the cowering little creature. It was a baby gazelle that had recently been abandoned by its mother, and was supposed to be kept safely away from the other, rougher patients.

"Oh, please ... Miss Tass! The gazelle is frightened of the leopards. Here ... let me take it."

Petronella looked up at Valezina quickly, amused at her concern. Then, instead of allowing the horrified girl to pick up the gazelle, she turned her back slightly, like a cat preventing a captive mouse being rescued.

"Ha, Valezina! I said you were no cat person!"

Valezina watched, appalled, as Petronella allowed the leopard cubs to play with the tiny gazelle. It was crouching stock-still under Petronella's extravagantly ringed fingers, obviously frozen with terror, as the playful cubs mauled at it with their immature paws, purring, growling, and trying to bite.



"Oh ... how could you?" Valezina was almost crying now.

"Don't be silly, Valezina. The cubs won't hurt it," Petronella purred. "My late father was one of the world's top experts on the big cats," she went on. "You won't have heard of him, of course. Naturally, I wouldn't expect you to. But I grew up with cats, Valezina. I understand them." She stroked the frightened little creature with her fingertips as the cubs continued their rough and tumble game. "How do you suppose a she-leopard teaches her cubs to hunt and kill? She does exactly the same as I am doing: she catches a little gazelle, or some such creature, and encourages them to play with it."

Valezina was trembling with rage by this time, and finally, unable to stand it any longer, she reached out, thrust Petronella's arm aside, and picked up the terrified little creature, shaking the leopard cubs off, tumbling them onto the floor. The gazelle snuggled itself close to her, its limpid eyes glazed with fear.

"Oh ... take the stupid creature, then," Petronella snapped. "That's what you are, Valezina ... you're a gazelle person! All right, take the side of the antelopes if you want to do battle with me, and I shall take the side of the leopards. Then we shall see who is the stronger!"

"I think you are very cruel."

"I can be, Valezina. Yes, I can be."

She dislodged the cubs which had crawled onto her lap and stood up, bared her teeth in a smile, and stalked out of the room, leaving Valezina pale and a little shaken.. She was still visibly upset by the time her round was completed and she re-entered the director's office. Petronella was there, talking to Philip Scott, and she might have decided to complain about the incident there and then, but for the fact that the old professor was in the room too. Somehow, in his school-masterly presence, it would seem too much like telling tales; besides which, she guessed that Petronella was well able to win any war of words.

"Hello, Valezina," said Philip as he looked up. "Come in ... we were just discussing the final details." He paused, and a concerned look came over his face. "Are you feeling all right, Valezina? You look a little pale."

"I'm fine, thank you. Good morning, Professor Trumpet!"

"Hello, my dear," the professor smiled. "I'm glad to see you are settling in okay!"

Petronella said nothing as she crouched over the desk, her golden-green eyes sleepy, a faint smile playing about her features. Their brief encounter that morning had prompted Valezina to recall an important lesson: antelopes must tread warily when leopards are on the prowl.

"We are due at the airport midday Saturday," said Philip. That's the day after tomorrow, so we had better take tomorrow off to give us a chance to pack, and buy anything we need. Then we can all meet up here on Saturday morning. Oh, by the way, Valezina, here is that advance I promised you."

Valezina was glad of the salary advance – without it, she would have been obliged to borrow from her parents – and Friday saw her enjoying the very necessary indulgence of last-minute shopping.

Saturday morning dawned, and Valezina was up and ready to go before seven o'clock. Her luggage dated from her parents' time in Africa, manifestly old, but still presentable and eminently serviceable. She stacked her cases just inside the zoo gate, where the head keeper was already bustling around the director's Bentley. He was going to drive them to the airport himself, and was about to load the cases into the car.

"Good morning, Miss Fearn!" he said.

Valezina had still not become completely used to being treated with such deference, and was finding it quite a pleasant experience. The head keeper fingered the maker's label on some expensive-looking cases patterned in golden-orange.

"Louis Vuitton," he read. "Guess who those belong to!"

There was no need to guess, however, for Petronella Tass herself was approaching now, crossing the courtyard from the direction of the director's office.

"Please be careful with those bags, Charles," she called. "They cost the earth!"

The head keeper finished stowing Petronella's things and turned his attention to the director's well-used and slightly battered leather cases. Philip Scott himself strode across as Valezina's cases were going aboard.

"Hello, Valezina," he said. "I wonder where the professor has got to ... ah! Here he is now, I think."

A taxi driver could be seen struggling through the staff door, dragging an enormous studded leather chest, closely followed by the professor carrying a rucksack.

"Good morning, professor," he called, then added quietly: "Why the man doesn't get some sensible travelling cases instead of that cumbersome great trunk, heaven only knows ..."

Eventually everything was ready, and the party took their seats; the Bentley moved off through the main gates, and swung smoothly into the morning traffic. At the airport their flight departure was on time, and it was not long before they had left the grey climate of England behind.

2 *Chikita revisited*

Long flights are always somewhat cramped and tiring, and this was no exception. There were several refuelling stops *en route*, but these gave them little chance to stretch their legs. And even when they finally landed at Maringa Airport on the Monday morning, they were to find no immediate respite from travelling, for their journey was scheduled to continue overland almost without a break.

As they emerged from the customs and immigration checkpoints, a lone figure strode forward to greet them. This, it turned out, was one of the few members of the Makarangan hierarchy who actually supported their cause, and championed the threatened animals of Chikita and other doomed habitats: the former minister of game and fisheries, Jason Muvumba. Both Philip and the professor knew him, and returned his greetings warmly, then introduced Petronella and Valezina.

"Welcome to Makaranga," he said, as he took Valezina's hand. "I knew your father, as a matter of fact. We all thought he was a first-class game warden."

Muvumba was a tall man with classical African good looks, and a solicitous manner.

"Have you had breakfast?"

"Thank you; we breakfasted on the plane."

"Then let us start right away."

Muvumba led the way from the airport buildings towards the adjacent car park, followed by a porter wheeling their cases on a trolley, and escorted them to a smart blue and white minibus which stood on the tarmac. There still remained some two hundred miles to journey by road before they reached Chikita Forest, and they settled themselves as comfortably as they could. At least, there was ample room in the minibus for them to stretch their legs. Muvumba manoeuvred the vehicle out of the airport gates, and they set off at a fast pace down the road.

It had been autumn back in England, but here it was spring. The first rains of the season had fallen, and everywhere was to be seen the brilliant red young foliage of *musasa* trees – a colour so bright that it made the bush a place of beauty. Now and then they passed a herd of cattle, grazing on the newly-sprung grass.

Before long the highway narrowed to a single tar-strip with an unsurfaced shoulder on either side of the carriageway. After a couple of hours they turned off the main road, and from that point on the road surface consisted of loose gravel, pot-holed and corrugated, topped with thick dust that billowed in their wake, rustling against the underside of the minibus and seeping through the bodywork so that it hung in the air inside the vehicle, making them sniff and sneeze.

The countryside all around was sandier and drier now, with thorny savannah forest punctuated by heavily wooded koppies that reared out of the trees – enormous boulders piled seemingly higgeldy-piggeldy by some primeval cataclysm.

At midday they stopped at the little town of Umkwanda, and ate at the local hostel: an unpretentious place, but clean, and the food was palatable enough. No time was wasted there, however, and they were very soon on their way again. From then on the road was little better than a track, unsurfaced and often badly pot-holed. They forded one or two streams flowing quite dangerously high with the spring rains, cascading through dense tangles of liana-hung forest.

A party of baboons crossed the road ahead of them, stopping to stare, and then bounding away to safety, the mothers carrying their babies clinging to their backs like jockeys. Then they were travelling through another monotonous belt of dry savannah, dotted with flat-topped acacia trees.

Once, they passed a broad green marsh where two crowned cranes were performing their charming courtship dance near the road. Valezina pointed out a pair of ostriches patrolling side by side in the distance. Nearby, a suspicious reedbuck splashed away, and in the middle distance a herd of large antelope were drinking at the stream.

Soon they were plunging along an increasingly narrow dirt track, and at length the minibus crested a long, low hill with cultivated farmlands opening out on one side. Before them stretched miles of dry bush, backed in the far distance by a range of purple mountain peaks. Muvumba slowed the vehicle to a crawl and pointed out across the thorny trees and scrub towards a spot where the land seemed lower and looked darker, despite the brilliance of the afternoon sun.

"Chikita!" he announced.

Their eyes followed his pointing finger. A rocky ridge, crowned with scarlet *musasa* trees stood out clearly above the dull green and brown of the acacia bush, and beyond the ridge they could see a towering mass of evergreen forest mounding skywards like a black hill. Even at this distance they could distinguish the silhouettes of the tallest trees, their topmost limbs and spreading crowns.

"The camp is just beyond that ridge. We should be there in half an hour."

Their party had been fortunate, of course, in not having to bring their own camping equipment; fortunate too in having as their ally an ex-minister with free access to government stocks of animal cage-traps and game-handling equipment. When Valezina's father worked there, such items were always on hand for projects which entailed moving animals, but they had seldom been used since, if at all.

An American expedition, too, had set up camp on the edge of Chikita Forest; they were as interested as the British in the possibility of saving some at least of this unique enclave of wildlife, and the whole project had been planned as a joint venture, with the backing of their respective governments.

The minibus reached the ridge and started to climb, its occupants glad of the cooling shade from the tall trees which overhung the track, for it had become stiflingly hot during their long drive. Then they were over the top and down the other side, where the American camp was huddled alongside the track with about four tents, a few

vehicles, and a stack of assorted equipment. Muvumba drove a little further until they reached a small clearing where they could see a bundle of folded tents, a stack of equipment and some cage-traps. He pulled off the track and everyone climbed out thankfully, breathing in the moist, dust-free air of the forest surrounds.

"I have chosen this spot for your camp," said Muvumba. "I hope you approve ..."

A trickle of pure water cascaded down between a jumble of rocks before disappearing underground at the foot of the ridge.

"This spring seldom dries up – certainly not now the rains have started."

He caught some water with his cupped hands and splashed his face with a contented sigh. The others followed his example and washed off the dust in the cool spring water. Then they turned their attention towards the business of setting up camp.

"This was the reason I didn't want to waste too much time in town," Muvumba explained. "It's not very pleasant having to set up camp after dark."

As they worked, he brought them up to date on the situation.

"The developers have set up camp on the far side of Chikita," he said. "They are already making inroads, and the work is tending to drive the wildlife towards this side of the forest, so you will probably find a greater concentration of birds and animals near the camp than you had expected."

"That should make our work easier," Philip remarked.

Petronella smiled at Valezina as she struggled with a tent-pole. "It will also give the forest leopards an easier time with their hunting," she said, quietly.

Valezina supposed that the remark had been intended to intimidate her – but if so it failed in its attempt. She felt she was on home territory now, and was quite equal to Petronella's tricks.

"Yes, it certainly will," she said, sweetly. "I like to think that the leopards are happy. There are few things in life more disagreeable than a frustrated cat, don't you think?"

She had to admit to herself, however, that Petronella too looked quite at home in these surroundings, standing there in front of that jumble of rocks hung with lianas, the little waterfall flashing silver near her shoulder, beneath a canopy of scarlet leaves where a *musasa* was just catching the sunlight above the ridge. With her green leopard's eyes and golden hair she looked every inch an efficient, heartless killer of unwary creatures. Valezina decided that a more friendly approach on her part might be advisable.

"Our old bungalow was on the southern boundary of the forest," she said, conversationally. "I think it must be where this track joins the dirt road from Chikita Mission ..."

Jason Muvumba overheard her remark, and spoke before Petronella had a chance to answer. "The old game warden's bungalow is just a ruin now," he said. "And so is Chikita Mission, come to that. It was destroyed in the fighting just before independence, and it has never been restored. The missionaries all went home, I think."

"So we are pretty well isolated now?"

"Apart from the timber fellers' camp the other side of the forest, yes. The nearest store now is at Umkwanda ... someone will have to drive over there for supplies when we run out. While I'm here, of course, my minibus is at your disposal."

By the time they had finally fixed the tents to their satisfaction, the sun was low behind the ridge and had made an orange halo around the trees which crowned the rocks. They raided Muvumba's store of food, set up a stove, brewed tea, and cooked themselves a meal. They were all very hungry; the effects of their lunch had long since worn off.

No sooner had they finished eating when the Americans strolled over to make their acquaintance. In their way, and to Valezina's amusement, they were almost exactly the counterparts of the British team: with a zoo director as leader and figurehead, supported on the one hand by an influential female, and on the other by an academic male adviser, and assisted by a young female who appeared to have more to offer in the way of practical experience than professional qualifications.

The two parties did differ in one important respect, however: neither of the two females could be described as attractive. The younger girl was pretty in her way, but dumpy; the older, straight-laced and horn-rimmed, was probably more interested in animals than she was in men.

The American director, by way of contrast, was a striking and particularly handsome man – and it was plain to Valezina that he shared this laudatory opinion of himself. He had the square jaw-line of a business tycoon; he sported an expensive silk shirt which was open almost to the waist, exhibiting his tanned and darkly hairy chest, the effect heightened by a purple and green bandana held with a gold clasp round his neck. Valezina noticed that his trousers were sharply pressed, and wondered how he managed to keep them so immaculate – and guessed that they, too, had only very recently arrived at Chikita.

"Hi there! I'm Frank Schulman!"

He removed his black stetson hat and swept it through the air in a somewhat theatrical gesture towards Petronella and herself, showing his glossy black hair, long, thick and tumbled like a lion's mane. Valezina reigned in her thoughts with some impatience. Why should she think that the man had hair like a lion's mane, for goodness' sake? She hoped her job was not beginning to go to her head.

The British contingent got to their feet and the director held out his hand.

"I'm Philip Scott. How do you do!"

The two men had been in regular correspondence, of course, but this was their first face-to-face meeting. The others made their introductions in turn, and there were handshakes all round. Everyone sat down wherever they could find the space.

Hank Schulman sat on an ancient fallen log with his back against a boulder, and Valezina had the impression that he was instantly relaxed, spreading his long limbs luxuriously. He was plainly a man well used to commanding a situation. When he smiled Valezina could see why she had thought of a lion when Schulman removed his hat: with that unyielding jaw and prominent cheek bones, the skin tanned golden brown beneath the tumbled hair, and the way he settled himself on the log; all this gave him precisely the look of the king of the beasts, watching over his pride. Somehow, Valezina just knew that he and Petronella would be attracted to one another – and she was right.

"Not Vernon Tass's daughter? Why all the zoo directors in the world knew him ... and we owe him a lot for passing on to us something of his vast knowledge of the big cats. Tell me, Miss Tass – or may I call you Petronella – have you inherited your father's love for the felines? Oh, yes – I can see you have!"

Petronella positively purred as she basked in his attentions.

"Have you taken any animals yet?" Philip asked as soon as he had the chance. He was finding it difficult to steer the conversation towards their main purpose, for the leopard woman and the lion man were dominating most of the talk.

"Well, no – we only arrived yesterday," explained Schulman.

"Then perhaps we can lay a few experimental cage-traps tomorrow," Philip suggested. "It seems to me that the most important catches to aim for would be the small forest antelope, the squirrels and the monkeys. Apart from the mice and shrews, they are the really unique species, I think. And then of course there are the birds: Hildebrand's robin is unique – and so is the black-crowned guinea fowl and the ring-tailed warbler ..."

Petronella interrupted him. "And so is the forest leopard unique," she said. "We mustn't forget that this is classified as a distinct race."

"Right!" said Schulman.

"Not to mention the Chikita serval, which is another fairly large cat that ought to be preserved."

"Right!" Schulman said again. "If we can set up a temporary menagerie right here, in the shadow of this ridge, we can do the picking and choosing later on. Any surplus to requirements we could perhaps release in some belt of riverine forest – like that stream we forded on the way here – what was its name?"

"That was the Nyamkwazi River," said Muvumba.

"Right! They would stand a better chance of survival there than in the dry bush."

The Americans bade them goodnight presently and made their way back to their own camp site, and it was not long before the British party and Jason Muvumba followed their example and retired to their tents. Valezina lay in her sleeping bag pleasantly tired and relaxed, but still wide awake until the early hours of the morning, listening to the once-familiar sounds of the African forest night.

After breakfast next day everyone bustled around, assembling the cage-traps to both catch and transport the animals they managed to rescue. The Americans had already arranged for a truck to be sent, when it was needed.

When a stack of cages had been assembled they walked into the forest, using compasses to help them keep their bearings. It was so easy to get lost, if only temporarily, and lose all sense of direction under the trees. Their topmost canopy all but blocked out the sunlight some two hundred feet above their heads, and the dense undergrowth that formed a thicket on all sides made walking very difficult – at least for any creature much larger than a little forest antelope, or a leopard able to slink close to the ground. Even the cat-like Petronella was finding it difficult to make good progress through the fastness of Chikita.

Had the Makarangan government been more co-operative, they might have been able to recruit a gang of helpers to carry and distribute the cages; as things stood, they were obliged to struggle the hard way, carrying the heavy cages back and forth through the undergrowth.

The undergrowth was liberally criss-crossed with game tracks – the paths used by wild forest creatures – and the technique they were using involved taking a compass bearing through the trees, and setting one of the traps on every faint track they came across. The first batch of cages was intended to trap any small mammals that might blunder into them, and were unlikely to catch any carnivorous creature like a leopard. These would need some kind of bait to persuade them to enter a cage.

Halfway through the morning, Hank Schulman, Philip Scott, the professor and Valezina were struggling with one of the cages, when a party of bush-pigs crashed noisily away through the thicket, startling them for a moment.

"I shouldn't be surprised if most of our cages catch bush-pigs," Philip remarked. "They might prove a bit of a nuisance."

"A nuisance maybe – but they would make ideal bait for the cat traps," Schulman observed. "I shall have a prowl around with my gun presently, I think."

Suddenly a bellowing, explosive call echoed through the foliage, the sound coming from high up in the tree crowns. Everybody stopped short and put their cages down.

"Kondo!" Valezina exclaimed. "that's the monkey you mentioned, professor – Stevenson's samango."

Hank Schulman was clearly impressed with Valezina's practical knowledge.

"How about that!" he said, then added: "If we are to catch some of those, I guess we shall need some sort of fruit as bait."

Childhood memories came to Valezina's mind. "As I recall, there is only one way to get them down from the trees," she said. "And that is to leave a basket of fruit on the ground where they can see them. There used to be some guava bushes growing near our bungalow ..."

"Guava? Say, isn't that an American fruit?"

"I believe it is. The missionaries were American, and I think they introduced them at some time. They grow like weeds!"

Later that afternoon Schulman brought one of his jeeps and took the British party to visit the old bungalow beyond the forest, prudently throwing an empty cardboard box into the back before they left.

Valezina leaned forward to point the way through the trees, as well as she could remember it, and Schulman manoeuvred the jeep off the dirt road and onto the overgrown track. A lump came to her throat as she caught sight of the bungalow – or what was left of it, for the roof had long since gone. The walls remained standing starkly, orange brick covered here and there with traces of whitewash, everything partly overgrown with greenery.

The garden had reverted to bush, but the effect was that of a sunny glade in the forest, for some of the flowering shrubs and other garden plants were still thriving, and several of the trees had grown very large, towering over the ruined veranda. It was a wild place now, a place of swallows and lizards.

Valezina was right about the guavas growing like weeds, for bushes full of them were crowding in everywhere, the fruit gleaming invitingly pink and yellow in the late afternoon sun. The four started to move between the bushes, selecting the ripest fruit. The American had buttoned his silk shirt and pulled the front out of the top of his pants like an apron to bag the fruit, and he looked over the leaves at Petronella, his handsome face creased in a broad grin.

"This is the way to do it, Petronella," he called. "Make the most of what you have available, that's what I say."

Not to be outdone, Petronella tugged her blouse out from its belt, wandering close to the American as she picked, stretching up revealingly to reach the higher branches. Both of them were soon weighed down with fruit, but they had not noticed the ferocious forest ants swarming over some of the branches. Suddenly Schulman gave a shout and dropped his guavas, his shirt flapping wildly in his left hand as he frantically brushed the biting insects off his chest and stomach with the right.

"Ow! Get offa me, you pesky critters!" he bawled, half laughing as he backed away. "I should beat a retreat if I were you, Petronella. They'll have the shirt off your back as soon as look at you!"

Petronella started to withdraw; then one of the ants bit her on the midriff, and her guavas went rolling too as she scrambled hurriedly back from the bushes.

"Oh, yes; I should have warned you about the ants," said Valezina, apologetically. "They don't care who they bite."

The crestfallen pair retrieved their fallen fruit gingerly, and continued picking, more cautiously now. Then everyone looked up as a sudden rustling in the treetops announced the arrival of a small party of vervet monkeys, swinging through the branches. They spotted the intruders and barked their sharp alarm call, their little black faces peering down anxiously.

"They were probably on their way to pick some guavas," said Valezina.

"Well, we have quite enough now for our own needs," said Philip. "So let's leave the monkeys to have their share, and get back to the camp."

Vervets are common throughout Africa, and even when their forest had been felled would be well able to look after themselves. The visitors left the abandoned garden and allowed the monkeys to swing down from the trees and gather their supper unhindered.

It was approaching dusk by the time they reached camp. After laying guava bait to catch the forest samango monkeys, there would still be enough left to supplement their own diet, and Valezina set some on to stew into a seedy pink pulp to eat with their evening meal.

After their meal the British party discussed the day's work over a flickering camp fire.

"It remains to be seen what these cage-traps come up with," said Philip. "And then maybe we can try a few baited cages for the cats."



"I expect you'll be interested to know that I have already laid a couple of the baited type with open spring doors, whilst I was with the Americans this morning," remarked Petronella casually. "Empty cages, of course. They should bait themselves during the night, and then maybe we shall catch something really interesting. Incidentally, those Americans don't seem to know one type of cage from another. Hank Schulman is a clever man, right enough, but the others are sheer novices."

It took a few moments for Petronella's information to sink in.

"You mean, you left some empty spring cages on the game-track, so that they will trap whatever happens along – and then push open to admit a hunting leopard? I say, Petronella, that's a bit strong, isn't it?" Philip protested. "Particularly when you don't know what the live bait is going to be ..."

"Oh, Philip, darling, don't be so squeamish," purred Petronella. "You know very well it will only be a bush-pig, or something like that; or perhaps one of the antelopes." She glanced at Valezina. "Surely we can sacrifice one or two of those, for the sake of a much greater prize!"

Valezina was horrified at the callousness of the woman. Apart from the suffering such a practice would cause to a trapped animal, there were other more serious possibilities.

"There is a little village on the far side of the forest," she said, keeping her voice firmly under control. "Has it occurred to you that an African child could get trapped in one of those cages – perhaps this afternoon while we were at the bungalow – and be stuck there all night, at the mercy of the leopards?"

Philip tried to reassure her. "It's not very likely, Valezina," he said. But his voice was doubtful as he turned back to his colleague. "Petronella, you really should not have done that." He stood up and retrieved his torch. "I'd better have a word with Schulman about this," he said. "He might agree to walk along the line of traps with me, and then perhaps we can put the bait-cages out of action for the night." He moved away from the firelight and disappeared in the direction of the American camp.

Petronella and Valezina were alone now. Professor Trumpet had already gone to the American tents, no doubt for a chat with his opposite number; Jason Muvumba had left that morning, and would be gone for a couple of days. Valezina knew it would be useless to bandy words with Petronella, so she sat silently for a while.

Suddenly the muffled, snarling cough of a hunting leopard came to their ears, the direction of the sound obscured by the trees. This was too much for Valezina. She got to her feet, crossed the clearing to her tent and rummaged among her things for the torch and compass. Then she turned back to Petronella.

"I'm not waiting until the others get back," she said. "Please tell them I've already started down the trap line."

"If that's what you want Valezina, of course! But take care you don't get eaten, won't you. Leopards can be dangerous, you know."

Valezina threw her a withering look as she started off towards the towering blackness of the forest. It may be frightening, it may be dangerous, to walk alone at night in the forest when leopards are on the prowl; indeed, her early childhood experiences had taught her that it was exceedingly dangerous. But, at least, she felt quite at home in these surroundings.

Using her torch as sparingly as she could, Valezina edged her way through the dense underbrush which formed the outer boundary of the forest, and aligned herself with the aid of her compass. If she stuck to this line, it would automatically bring her to each cage-trap in turn; there was no real danger of getting lost, though she could barely see a hand in front of her face without the torch.

A few yards into the big trees, some creature leaped almost from beneath her feet and blundered away noisily, its musky scent identifying it as a harmless civet. She followed her compass bearing grimly until she came to the first cage, which seemed to be empty. Then she found the second, and there was something trapped in this one – but she dared not stop to examine the creature she could hear snuffling and scuffling frantically as she passed. It would be secure from predators until they could collect it in the morning.

From a distance, the low-pitched call of a hunting leopard sounds like a hoarse, rasping cough; but from close up, as she heard it now, it was a grunting snarl which seemed to hiss through the darkness, and Valezina gritted her teeth resolutely as she continued checking the cages. Some were empty, others had occupants, some of which were stoical, some struggling wildly as they caught her scent.

She found the first of Petronella's bait-traps, and it was empty, so she closed the door and pulled the catch across to prevent it operating. The second of the bait-traps had caught something, and Valezina hastened to release it, murmuring soothingly to the small creature huddled inside. Despite her fear her heart melted when, by the light of her torch, she saw it was a young blue duiker. A mere mouthful for a hungry leopard, she thought bitterly, as she held the trap open and tried to persuade the little creature to emerge. Petrified, it refused to budge, even when she moved to the rear of the cage and prodded it gently between the bars. Then, lying awkwardly supported by one elbow, she held the door open and reached inside, intending to drag the fawn out bodily, but it was too far for her arm to stretch.



At that moment the leopard mewled horribly, and the sound came from very close at hand. Twisting uncomfortably where she lay, Valezina hastily aimed her torch in the direction of the sound, the darting beam lighting up a tangle of vegetation. Then she caught sight of the leopard's eyes shining bright green where it crouched a few yards away, its head low, shoulders rippling.

There was only one thing left for her to do: she wriggled forwards into the cage, kicking the trap door shut behind her and snapping down the catch, her torch beam knifing wildly through the trees. As the dazzling light left the leopard's eyes it sprang upwards and forwards in a spitting, snarling fury, landing with all four feet on the cage, its claws rending at the wooden frame. Valezina drew in her feet and arms tightly, making herself as small as possible, holding the young duiker close to her body, and successfully keeping out of reach of the leopard's flailing claws.

Once she felt reasonably secure against the big cat's onslaught, Valezina flashed her torch again, this time straight into the leopard's eyes, dazzling and confusing it. After what seemed like several minutes of this weird game, the baffled creature let out a blood-curdling cat-scream of frustration, jumped lightly from the cage, and disappeared into the darkness, leaving Valezina shaking like a leaf, but still cradling the tiny antelope in her arms.

Suddenly torches flashed outside the cage, and there were voices all around. During the frantic tussle with the leopard Valezina had not heard the men's approach, and it seemed likely that their arrival had helped to drive the big cat away. She reached forward thankfully to release the trap door, and in a moment strong arms were helping her out and lifting her to her feet.

As she stood up, those arms were almost crushing the remaining breath from her lungs; as it was, she was still gasping and her heart was pounding. Her brush with death, followed so rapidly by an intense feeling of relief, had made her a little light-headed. As though she feared she might fall she clung tightly, one arm flung over Philip's shoulder, the other low around the muscular curve of his back. As she tried to catch her breath, her heart beating audibly it seemed, she held her head close against his chest. Briefly, to her surprise, she could hear his heart beating, too.

"Are you all right, Val?" Philip's voice held an edge she had not heard before. "Did you get scratched?"

Valezina finally found her breath enough to speak, and immediately she was surprised again, for her own voice sounded strong and firm.

"I'm perfectly all right, thank you Philip."

Philip held her closer still, so that she was obliged to struggle a little to free herself.

"Oh, Val," he said quietly. Then he released her briefly, only to grip her more strongly by the shoulders, giving her a rough shake.

"You stupid girl, Valezina," he said, brusquely. "Giving us all a fright like that! Oh, you stupid girl!"

An American voice cut through the blackness near her shoulder. "I'll second that," said the voice. "Of all the damn fool things to do ..."

Then Professor Trumpet's quiet voice spoke in her ear, its academic tones sounding strangely out of place in the darkness of an African forest. "You seem to have acquired a protégée, my dear." he said, enigmatically.

The professor was holding a torch shining downwards, and she looked down quickly. She could feel something small and softly firm pressing against the back of her calves in the darkness, and in the light of the torch she could see the baby duiker nuzzling up against her.



Valezina twisted free from Philip's clasp and stooped to lift the tiny creature, one hand under its belly, the other holding its spindly front legs, gently but firmly.

"There ... you see!" she stroked the little animal's sleek coat until it had stopped trembling. "How could anyone sleep peacefully, knowing that a creature like this might be held as bait for a leopard?"

"Well, both the bait-traps are sprung now," said Philip. "And the others will be secure till morning, so we might as well get back to camp." He made his voice sound stern as they struggled back through the thicket. "Don't ever walk along the trap line again on your own at night; is that clearly understood?"

"Yes, it is understood. And thank you all very much for coming to look for me. I'm sorry to have put you to all this trouble."

Hank Schulman spoke now. "I should hope so, too," he said. "If you want to risk your own life over some goddam fawn ... well, that's your privilege, I guess. But being reckless like that puts other people's lives in danger too." He was lecturing now, and there was no holding him. "Need I remind you that this is strictly a scientific project? There is no room for bambi-schmaltz on this expedition ..."

His voice droned on in the darkness, but Valezina was not listening. Presently they emerged from the trees and caught sight of the flickering light of their camp fire.

The two American men bade them goodnight without more ado, and Valezina turned to the stacked cages to prepare a safe pen for her captive. Somehow, she was not surprised to find that Petronella had already retired to her tent for the night. In fact, she found it rather amusing, and hoped that the woman might at least have had the grace to feel a little ashamed at her unfeeling action.

As she returned to the camp fire the professor was rummaging in his pack, and

as she was about to excuse herself and retire for the night he triumphantly produced a bottle of brandy and a syphon of soda. The friendly nightcap relaxed them beautifully, and smoothed the rough edge from their fraught nerves. The talk as they sat by the fire and sipped their drink was not of cages, leopards and fawns, but of home, family and friends. And when they finally doused the fire and went to bed, all three shared a feeling of well-being that was not entirely due to the brandy. In some measure the incident with the leopard, the shared danger, had established a subtle link of friendship.

Comfortably in her sleeping bag at last, Valezina gazed at the stars through the flap of her tent, and felt she had gained in stature by the events of that evening. When she fell asleep there was the merest hint of a satisfied smile playing in the corners of her mouth.

The following morning Valezina fed the baby antelope with some of the milk from Muvumba's supplies, the sort that had been treated to keep fresh for several weeks even in the tropical heat. She hoped it would prove suitable in the absence of natural antelope's milk. The fawn fed greedily, though it was still a time-consuming task. Hank Schulman came past their camp carrying his gun, hoping to bag a bush-pig or two for fresh meat to act as leopard-bait. He looked at Valezina rather coldly, and when he saw what she was doing he made an exasperated noise. She hoped he would not be small-minded enough to bear a grudge.

As soon as she could she rejoined the team bringing in and replacing the spring-traps, and gradually a small menagerie of animals began to be built up, the cages arranged in the shade close to the rocky ridge. Nobody actually mentioned the incident of the night before, and Valezina felt that whatever happened between them here at Chikita, she possessed one great advantage over them all: she had been born and brought up right here, in this African forest. She felt she could look down on them, British and Americans alike, with all the superiority of a local resident doing business with a coach-load of tourists.

3 *Dénouement*

Valezina had taken it upon herself to collect fodder for the herbivorous animals they had so far caught. When they had leopards, servals, or other flesh-eaters in the cages, special arrangements would, of course, need to be made; the responsibility for providing meat would fall on the men.

As she worked, a tsetse fly persisted in annoying her, zooming down like a kamikaze pilot, and she armed herself with a whisk of leafy browse to drive it away. Antelopes and other wild creatures usually prove to be immune to nagana, the serious disease that infects domestic cattle and is carried by the tsetse; but humans were vulnerable to the dreaded sleeping sickness, for which the tsetse was also responsible, and Valezina had no wish to fall victim.

A voice from somewhere close behind interrupted her thoughts and she turned around quickly. A young African boy was standing there, grinning as he watched her swiping unsuccessfully at the fly.

"You missed it!" he exclaimed in the Chikaranga tongue.

Valezina grinned back at him. "Well, see if you can do any better," she retorted. "You catch it!"

The boy advanced to the centre of the clearing, watched by a dozen pairs of animal eyes from the makeshift menagerie. Here he stopped and held out his bare arm, standing quite still with the other arm raised, his hand poised ready to strike. After a few seconds the large fly swooped from where it had been circling, and alighted on the inviting arm. The boy waited until it was about to work its sharp proboscis into his skin, then swatted quickly with open fingers, and the tsetse fell lifeless to the ground.

"Very good" Thank you for that!" Valezina exclaimed, glad to find that she had lost none of her childhood ability to talk to the local kids. After all, she had not spoken the language for several years.

She looked at the boy more closely. He was perhaps twelve years old, short-skirted and shirtless, his developing body already sturdy. He had inherited the rather attractive combination of broadly negroid features with a fair, milk-chocolate complexion.

"What's your name?"

"My name is Mali."

"I'm Valezina. Where do you live?"

Mali indicated a direction. "Not far."

Valezina guessed he came from one of the kraals on the edge of the forest, quite near the ruins of her old bungalow.

Mali inspected the cages seriously, naming the animals as he saw them. "I'd like to help you catch the animals, if you'll let me, Miss Valezina," he said. "I know the forest well."

Valezina smiled and nodded. A keen volunteer like him would be a great asset. "You're welcome," she said. "You can come with me this morning to try and catch kondo!"

This invitation pleased the boy no end, and with his face wreathed in the broadest of smiles he set to helping Valezina gather foliage until all the remaining animals had been fed. A few minutes later he was leading the way along one of the faint game tracks winding through the trees, carrying a monkey trap with its quota of guava fruit on his head, with Valezina shouldering another of the cage traps. It turned out she was not alone in her assessment of guavas as the most effective monkey bait.

"All monkeys love guavas," Mali remarked, taking a thoughtful bite out of one of the fruit for his own refreshment. "But kondo likes them most of all."

Valezina was reflecting that soon, if government plans were brought to their conclusion, there would be no trees left in Chikita for this rare monkey to live in. Taking them away to live and breed in a zoo was a poor substitute for leaving them and their habitat undisturbed.

As though he read her thoughts, the boy said: "We should all like the forest to be left as it is. But the government says we must clear the land to grow more food, and I suppose the government knows best. But it is a great pity, I think."

Before long they heard the guttural warning bark of a samango monkey, and soon there was a great rustling and shaking high in the tree tops as a troop of the creatures swung away through the foliage, leaving their leader bobbing up and down on his branch, staring down at the human intruders.

"Listen, Miss. Let's drop just one guava on the ground as we walk past. Kondo will see that we're carrying guavas, and then he will follow us through the branches, to find out where we are taking them."

He reached inside the cage and dropped one of the fruit, letting it fall casually as if by accident, so that it rolled underfoot as they passed. The monkey stared down silently from his vantage point; then he stopped bobbing up and down and was still, watching their progress through the undergrowth until they had passed out of sight. As they walked away they could hear an occasional rustle amongst the foliage as he followed cautiously through the tree tops.

Soon they came to a glade where a few rays of sunlight beamed through and reached the ground – a gap created when a giant red mahogany had died of old age and fallen – and here they set their cage traps, rolling a few of the fruit carelessly across the ground so as to catch the monkey's eye. Then they retreated and retraced their steps along the game track while they waited for the traps to be sprung. It seemed a suitable opportunity to take Mali back to camp for some lunch, and anyway they would probably need the assistance of the men to carry the cages complete with their catch.



As they reached the camp Hank Schulman and Petronella Tass were quartering the carcass of a wild pig at the side of the track. Petronella could be an intensely practical person, where the welfare of her beloved cats was concerned. Valezina rummaged in the supply tent, made a fresh brew of tea, and handed Mali a generous slice of bread and jam.

Schulman walked back along the track and, in a moment, returned with his jeep so that they could stow the leopard bait aboard. Petronella looked across at Valezina disapprovingly as she stood, holding a pig's quarter dripping blood, its bristly black hide still attached.

"This is Mali," said Valezina. "He is making himself very useful indeed. He's earned his bread and jam this morning!"

Mali grinned at Petronella. "Masikati, missus!" he said, pleasantly.

Petronella sniffed as she heaved the hunk of boar meat onto the extended tailboard of the jeep. "Valezina, I do hope you're not going to encourage all the local native riff-raff into thinking they can come and go as they please," she scolded. "They are certain to be light-fingered, at best. We do have some valuable equipment here, you know. There's nobody on guard most of the day ... and we certainly don't want them to start prowling around at night!"

She glared at Mali, her hands dripping pig's blood, while the boy grinned back good-humouredly, a smear of jam on his cheek.

Hank Schulman got out of his jeep and interceded on Valezina's behalf. Perhaps he was not bearing a grudge, after all. "Oh come, Petronella my dear," he said. "If Valezina speaks the local lingo she can keep an eye on him ... and, goodness knows,

we need all the support we can get. Let's not eschew a little volunteer help."

Mali raised his piece of bread in salute. "Masikati, mambo," he said.

"What's he say?"

"He just said 'good afternoon, chief!' "

"Well, good afternoon, boy. And just tell him, if any of the men at his place want to come and help with the cages when we're around, we shall be only too glad to see them."

Valezina relayed the message, and the American and Petronella climbed into the jeep and drove away along the track.

As soon as Valezina had finished her snack, she walked alongside the track and past the cages, looking for someone to help carry back their traps complete with any samango monkeys they may have succeeded in catching. But it seemed that everyone was busy elsewhere, and eventually she and Mali set off by themselves towards the glade where they had set their guava-baited traps.

As they reached the glade, though they walked softly, the familiar explosive bark of a samango monkey heralded their approach, and they could hear a great scrabbling and rustling as the troop took to the trees. Valezina peered through the leafy opening cautiously, and then Mali called out in triumph and ran forwards, grinning.

Two of the creatures, one of them mature and very large, had been caught in the first cage; three smaller ones were in the other. Their little brown and grey faces glared out at their captors as they shook the bars angrily with strong hairy arms, then retreated to pick and pull at the trap-doors, their thick dark-haired tails gripping the roof bars as they swung up and down, trying in vain to puzzle out the secret of the monkey-proof spring catches.

There was no magic way by which Valezina could pacify the frightened creatures beyond acting calmly and confidently herself, and she wasted no time in trying to soothe them. They would become adapted and accept the situation in their own time.

"Are we going to be able to carry them?" she wondered aloud, as she and Mali took one of the cages between them and lifted.

It was heavy, but not too much for them to handle if they took their time over it. She decided to stagger the operation, carrying one cage for a hundred yards or so, then coming back for the other in turn, to give their aching muscles a chance to recover. Shuttling the cages along the game trail in this way, they finally emerged from the fringe of the forest with the first load of monkeys, to find everyone in the British camp, talking together in a group, plainly engrossed in their discussion. Valezina and the boy returned immediately for the second cage, brought this out too, and set it down next to the first, the five captive monkeys peering out curiously, recovering from their shock.

As Valezina flexed her weary arms, she noticed that a strange Land Rover was

parked by the side of the track, and she walked towards the knot of people who were still deep in conversation by the camp fireplace. Philip Scott looked up as she approached, his handsome features unruffled.

"Ah, there you are, Valezina. My!" he added, gazing at the two cages. "That looks a useful haul!"

She could see now that two strangers had arrived. One of them was a white man, thick-set and heavily tanned, wearing a broad-rimmed felt hat and faded shirt and shorts. The other was black, with a smooth, well-fed countenance, clad in a neat white shirt and city trousers, and carrying a clip-board of papers under his arm.

Philip turned to the newcomers. "This is my assistant, Valezina Fearn," he announced. "Valezina, this is Mr Ngulube – is that right? – from the agricultural department; and this is Mr Van Jaarsveld, who holds the concession for felling and extracting the timber from Chikita Forest. Well, we're all present now."

The African official gave a curt little bow towards Valezina and said: "How do you do?"

As Valezina responded, Van Jaarsveld interrupted her rudely. "There was somebody with you just now," he said, accusingly. "You had an African boy with you ..."

Valezina opened her eyes wide in surprise, looking round for Mali. "Why, yes," she said. "He's been helping me carry out the cages. Why?" She looked round again, but Mali was nowhere to be seen. He must have slipped away when he spotted the newcomers.

Van Jaarsveld raised his voice. "Because somebody has sabotaged two of my bulldozers, that's why," he exclaimed. "And I intend to find the culprits! You people are against the felling of Chikita, aren't you? You admit that, don't you?"

Philip Scott spoke soothingly. "Of course we're against the felling," he said. "That's why we're here ... but you surely don't think that we had any part in wrecking your machines ..."

"Not directly, perhaps. But you could easily have paid somebody else to do it!"

"Don't be ridiculous!"

"Well, we shall see who is being ridiculous." He glared at them from beneath the brim of his hat. "Why did that boy run away when he saw me, if he's innocent?"

"One can hardly blame him, with your aggressive attitude," snapped Valezina, her eyes blazing.

The African official held up his hand in a conciliatory gesture. "Mr Van Jaarsveld – please." Then he turned to Valezina with his clip-board ready. "Now then ... Miss Fearn – you say there was a boy helping you. What was his name?" Ngulube held his ballpoint ready.

"Oh, goodness," said Valezina, vaguely. "I don't know ... he's just some local child ..."

Petronella spoke from beyond the little group of people, her voice sounding very sweet and clear. "Why, Valezina dear, you must have forgotten. You told me his name was Mali!"

Valezina looked daggers at Petronella as the official noted the boy's name on his sheaf of papers.

"Do you know his other name? The name of his village?"

"I really have no idea. I know very little about him – except that he's certainly not the type of person to do anything like that. In fact, he was telling me that he agrees with the government policy of growing more food. Of course, he would have liked the forest to remain the way it was – we all would! But I'm quite sure he would never think of sabotaging anything. Why, I could guarantee it!"

The official was still writing. "You will guarantee him personally ... so, this boy is well educated, is he?"

Valezina frowned. "I really don't know. No; I don't think so, not particularly ..."

"But he speaks very good English?"

"Why, no ..."

Petronella interrupted again, her voice as clear as a bell. "Oh, Valezina; don't be so modest!" She turned to Ngulube, her golden eyes gleaming. "Miss Fearn was born and brought up right here at Chikita," she purred. "She speaks the local language like a native!"

"Aha!" Ngulube lowered his clip-board and looked at Valezina with renewed interest. "So you are, in fact, a Makarangan citizen?"

Valezina sighed. "I was born here, yes. But I've been living in England since I was a child."

Van Jaarsveld had been regarding her with narrowed eyes, weighing her up suspiciously. "Fearn ..." he murmured. "Fearn ... Are you any relation to the Fearn who used to be warden here?"

Valezina's hopes rose. Perhaps there would be less enmity between them once some sort of link had been established. "Why, yes," she said, smiling. "That was my father!"

Van Jaarsveld's eyes opened wider and his voice rose to a shout. "What? You are Fearn's daughter? Well then, let me tell you, my girl ... I've got more than one bone to pick with you! It was because of Fearn that I was forced into bankruptcy when I was

ranching cattle!" He has spluttering now, his face distorted. "He knew my cattle were dying of nagana! He knew it – and he could have stopped the tsetse in its tracks, simply by agreeing to shoot out all the game between the forest and my ranch; to clear a strip. That is what they did everywhere else. But would they do that for my ranch? Oh dear no! To hell with Van Jaarsveld! Let the Dutchman's cattle die, he thought. Let the Dutchman go broke! And now what do they do? I work my fingers to the bone to get the timber concession, and they send me Fearn's daughter to wreck the contract!"

He prodded Ngulube in the middle of his well-filled shirt. "I want you to do something about it. They're not getting away with this," he snarled. "They're not getting away with it! I shall go to the top!"

Everyone looked round just then at the sound of a vehicle churning along the track. It was Muvumba's minibus, and as it drew nearer they could see that Jason Muvumba himself was driving. He swung the vehicle onto the verge and switched off the engine, clambered out and walked towards them waving a piece of paper, and wearing a broad grin on his face. "Hold everything," he called. "I have brought good news!"

The Afrikaner glared, and Ngulube stood licking his lips uncertainly, cradling his clip-board against his chest. Philip took a step forwards, a welcoming smile starting on his face. Petronella lowered her golden head and stared without expression.

Hank Schulman had kept silent while Valezina was being questioned, and now he said: "Hello ... what's new, I wonder?"

As Muvumba approached them he noticed Van Jaarsveld and addressed him: "Ah! Just the very man I wanted to see." By the fireplace he stopped, and gestured with the letter in his hand. "The felling order has been cancelled, and all the work must cease forthwith. I'm afraid your timber concession has been withdrawn, Mr Van Jaarsveld."

Van Jaarsveld gaped, then exploded in a stream of Afrikaans invective. "Here ... Give me that paper," he growled.

Muvumba held the letter out at arm's length so that Van Jaarsveld could read it, but kept it firmly in his grasp. In his rage, the man would certainly have torn it up.

"This is a letter from the Prime Minister," announced Muvumba, looking at their faces in turn as he spoke. "He has been under considerable pressure from both the British and the American governments about this business, as you all know – and apparently the US government has finally threatened to withdraw all financial aid to the country, unless its wishes are complied with. Well, the long and short of it is – Chikita Forest is to remain protected as a wildlife preserve in perpetuity, and the Prime Minister has appointed me the new Minister for Natural Resources."

The waiting zoologists raised a little cheer, and Valezina sighed hugely with relief. Suddenly, it seemed that all their problems were solved. Philip Scott and Hank Schulman both pressed forward eagerly to shake Muvumba by the hand and slap him on the back.

"Marvellous news! Splendid!"

Jason Muvumba spoke to Ngulube, who had been regarding him doubtfully. "I think you'd better get to the nearest phone and call your minister," he suggested, sympathetically. "I dare say they'll be wanting you back at Maringa, now."

The agricultural official smiled ruefully, tugged his papers from their clip and pointedly tore them in half, letting the pieces fall into the camp fireplace. "Well," he said resignedly, brushing the palms of his hands together in a gesture of finality. "That's that, then!"

Van Jaarsveld stood glowering, his world seemingly collapsed around his ears. Valezina felt sorry for him – as one might feel sorry for a wounded lion that has turned man-eater. He slouched away towards his Land Rover, and the African official walked after him hurriedly, not wishing to find himself stranded without transport.

A few paces away the Dutchman turned and pointed aggressively at Valezina. "You've not heard the last of this," he snarled. "Not by a long chalk!"

Valezina looked at the others and gave an apologetic little smile. "I don't quite see why he wants to blame me for all his troubles," she said, feeling very much the innocent scapegoat.

The two American women were regarding her rather huffily, she thought. Surely they were not under the impression that she had actually been responsible for damaging the timber operatives' machines! She returned their look in surprise. Then the elder of the two spoke, petulantly.

"Well, there's no smoke without fire; and it was obvious that you were trying to conceal that boy's identity," she said, accusingly. "What had you got to hide? If he damaged the man's machines, he should be punished. And if you were a party to this, well ..."

Valezina drew herself up and glared at the American zoo official. "I was merely protecting an innocent child from false accusations," she said. "And, for your information, I am not in the habit of lying, or of sabotaging machinery – nor of being brow-beaten by narrow-minded people!"

The American woman bridled noticeably, plainly insulted, and let her breath out sharply with an indignant "Pshaw!"

Philip tried to act as peacemaker. "Valezina – there was no need for that," he admonished her sternly.

Valezina stopped and gathered the torn papers together in the grate, laid a few pieces of kindling wood over them and struck a match quickly. Whatever they contained, she thought, would be better destroyed. "I think it's about time we lit the fire," she remarked, lightly.

Petronella could not resist adding a little fuel of her own to the flames, and she leaned across to address the American woman soothingly as a wisp of smoke started to rise. "We all have to make allowances for Valezina, my dear," she murmured. "After all,

she was reared with the natives ... and being in Chikita seems to have brought it all out!"

The straight-laced zoologist took Petronella's remark at its face value, and her indignation increased. "Well, I think she's a trouble-maker," she said. "And I think I deserve an apology. Hank – make her apologize."

Hank Schulman broke off his conversation with Jason Muvumba and looked back at her. "Oh, shut up, Martha," he said, affably. "Come on, everybody – let's all have a drink to celebrate. Then we can let the animals go free."

As the others disappeared in the direction of the American camp, Valezina stooped to tend the fire she had just lit, then picked up a hatchet and began to split a few deadwood logs.

Professor Adrian Trumpet did not go with the others, He had played little part in the afternoon's proceedings so far, and he hung around now, as though undecided what to do. "How about a nice cup of tea, Val," he suggested. "It's a bit too early in the day for anything stronger, don't you think?"

Valezina agreed. She was still feeling more than a little peeved, and appreciated some uncritical company.

The professor strolled across to inspect the two cages of Stevenson's samango monkeys, which glowered back at him defiantly. "Don't worry, boys!" she heard him say. "We'll soon have you out of there!"

Valezina smiled. It was good to be able to liberate the animals after all – though she had to admit it was just a little galling to have to release them so soon after the hard work of catching them; but there was no point now in taking them away from their natural habitat.

As she split another log, she saw a small figure emerge from the forest with a bundle of firewood carried on his head. Mali walked up proudly and dumped the fuel next to the fire, looking at them with his customarily broad grin.

The professor grinned back at the boy and then looked at Valezina, a question mark in his eyebrows. "Are you going to tell him the good news?" he asked.

Valezina passed the message on, and Mali let out a whoop of joy. "You mean you don't want the monkeys now?" he cried. "Oh good! Plenty of meat for us!"

Valezina's involuntary look of horror was very evident, and the professor demanded a translation. He laughed when she told him.

"I bet you're not going to let him?"

"Certainly not!" Valezina said indignantly, getting to her feet. "I'm sorry, Mali ... but the monkeys will have to go free!"

She crossed the clearing to the cages, released the catches, and opened both

doors simultaneously. The samangos paused for a moment, taking in the situation, wary of another trap. Then suddenly they were gone with a great scratching of claws on the woodwork and a frantic chatter. Then she went back to the fire and made the tea.

As the three of them sat drinking tea, Jason Muvumba came along the track and walked up to them with a broad grin on his face.

"Would you like a mug of tea, Mr Muvumba?" Valezina asked.

"No thanks – I've just been drinking whisky," he said. "Well ... we've won! And I should like to thank you all very much."

Somewhat to Valezina's surprise he turned to Mali and patted the boy on the shoulder. "Well done!" He spoke in Chikaranga, but Valezina guessed that Professor Trumpet knew enough of the language to understand what was being said. "You certainly made a good job of those bulldozers!"

"What did he do," asked the professor. "Push a stick in the spokes?"

Valezina was not amused. For a while she was speechless, then she rounded on Jason Muvumba with a frown. "Did you put him up to it?" she demanded. "Did you get him to damage the machines?"

Muvumba held up his hands appeasingly. "No ... no; not just this boy," he protested. "The whole of the local population has been trying to slow the contractors down, in any way possible. If we hadn't been doing that, they would have felled a great deal more of the forest than they already have. One has to be very discreet. Your arrival here – and I mean both the British and the American zoological teams – also acted as a lever. It was really only a matter of time before the order came to stop work – but it could have been too late to save Chikita. Guerrilla warfare is often necessary against a powerful enemy, Miss Fearn, even in the cause of conservation!"

Valezina was only partly appeased. "But that sort of thing will only make Mali grow up believing that his aims can be achieved by means of violence. That's a terrible thing!"

"Of course, it is terrible," agreed Muvumba, apologetically. "But I'm afraid it's often true, in the world today. I know it's hard luck on the timber concessionaire – Van Jaarsveld; he's probably out of pocket because of this, and looking for someone to blame. But I shall try to get compensation for him, now I am a minister again."

The others were drifting back now, laughing among themselves, a little merry on their celebratory drinks. Mali thought it a good time to go, and shouted a hurried goodbye to Valezina as he ran across the track and disappeared among the trees.

"Well, everybody," called Hank Schulman. "We had better start getting all the cages out of the forest now if we're going to get the job finished before dark. At least, it will spare a few animals a night of suspense."

"And I shall go back to town," Muvumba said. "Oh, and by the way, I have sent

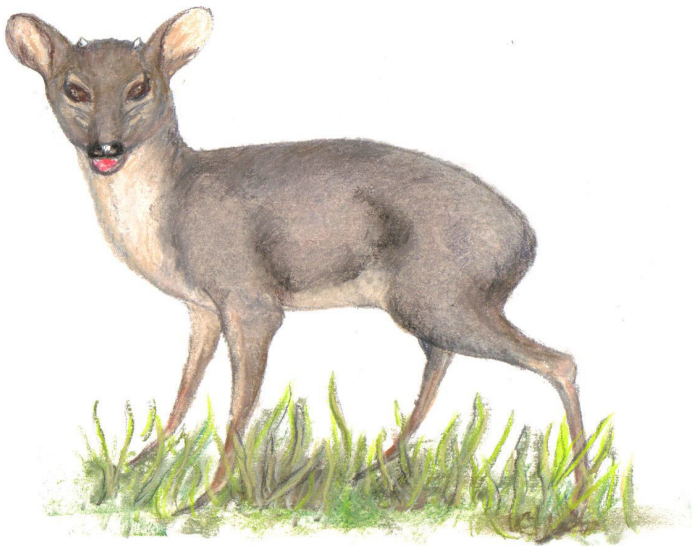
for one of my own game wardens who has been working up at Maguti Reserve. He can help you clear up if necessary, and make sure there are no further inroads into the forest. Also, he can keep his eyes open for poachers. I believe there have been one or two gangs of poachers heading this way in the belief that Chikita was being felled. Leopards fetch a high price on the black market. My man knows this area well; I believe he has family connections here – name of Chimonyo ..."

Valezina recognized it as a local family name, and wondered if it would turn out to be anyone she remembered from her childhood years.

"He should be here any time now," Muvumba continued. "When he arrives he will see to any of my camping equipment, and look after it until I get back. I bid you farewell!"

Everyone worked with a will, carrying the empty cages back to camp and stacking them as fast as they could. The afternoon wore on, and Valezina was opening the traps that were still occupied and releasing their captives. When she got to the little fawn that she had been feeding, she paused, wondering what to do. The little creature was not yet fully suckled, and she doubted if it would survive on its own.

Then an amazing thing happened. An adult blue duiker emerged from the forest and stood there, calling, and the fawn answered. Valezina released it quickly and watched as it trotted across the clearing and rejoined its mother. Together now, they would still have to take their chances with the leopards, but nature would triumph – and that could only be good. Valezina was well pleased.



It was not long after Muvumba's departure that a pickup truck drove up to the camp and a young African man got out and introduced himself. "Good evening," he called. "My name is Chimonyo, and I've been sent here by Mr Muvumba." Fortunately he spoke excellent English.

Philip Scott and Hank Schulman stepped forward to greet him, and after a short conversation began to introduce the others in turn. When it was Valezina's turn she and the newcomer stared long and hard at each other.

"Excuse me ... Valezina? Not Valezina Fearn who used to live here?"

"Benjamin! Ben Chimonyo!"

Surrounded by blank faces all round the two stepped forwards eagerly, and in a moment were locked in each other's arms. Their embrace lasted long enough for the others to react.

"Well, waddya know!" Schulman said.

"Well ... now I've seen everything!" This from Martha.

Philip looked bemused, and eventually said: "I take it you two know each other?"

Professor Trumpet chuckled good humouredly.

Petronella, to her credit, said nothing but merely watched, her head to one side, an amused smile on her face.

Anyone could clearly see that Valezina and Benjamin had taken up exactly where they had left off as sixteen-year-olds some seven years earlier.

Some time later, when all was packed up and the two parties were ready to go, the pair was nowhere to be seen. It had already been arranged that the Americans would take the British contingent back to Maringa Airport for their flight home, so there was no need for Jason Muvumba to return to the camp. With the Americans growing in impatience, they looked up and down the track anxiously.

Petronella did not help when she said: "She's obviously decided to marry this chap and raise a family here in Chikita. They're probably working on it already!"

"Well, she might at least have told us ..."

At that moment Benjamin's pickup truck came racing up and the two got out hurriedly, full of apologies for making everyone late. They had been visiting Benjamin's family, and of course everybody wanted to talk about old times. It was difficult to get away, and they had not realized quite how late it was becoming.

Remembering Petronella's remark, the assembled party waited for them to make some sort of an announcement. It was Benjamin who took Valezina by the arm and formally addressed Philip. It was perhaps not quite what they had been expecting: rather than an announcement it was a request – an application, and Philip listened patiently.

"This has been a lifelong ambition of mine, and having met Valezina so unexpectedly has given me the opportunity. I think it is very important to both Valezina and myself ..."

* * *

Three summers later Philip still reigned supreme at the zoo, still advised by his colleague Adrian Trumpet, now approaching retirement. As they had got to know each other better, Valezina felt that there was a closely affectionate tie between Philip and herself, and she made herself indispensable through her devotion to the creatures in her care.

Petronella Tass no longer gave her trouble. Although she had retained her father's name – a name so well known and respected in the study-world of big cats – she was now firmly settled as one of the directors of the New York Zoological Gardens, along with her husband and colleague, Hank Schulman.

Benjamin had never been happier, his ambition fulfilled, and hoping soon to be promoted to senior keeper specializing in African animals. The Chimonyos have a lovely young family, too. Childhood sweethearts often go on to make the happiest marriages.

