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Gerhard Swan with a fine leopard hunted in the Mateki hills, Zimbabwe: memories of a special hunt with great companions.

PREFACE

Why do I hunt?

There are two Africas, the one green, lush and very bright when the sap is running and the earth is wet; the other a dry golden-brown country besieged by drought but with bright red sunsets and a quiet blue dusk when all is hushed to a whisper – I don't know which I love best! Doris Lessing wrote this (or something very much like it) a long time ago and I wish that I had said that.

This is the Africa, with its lure of adventure and big game hunting, that attracted a very special breed of man at the turn of the 19th century to brave the 'dark interior' in search of its rugged romance. These were hardy and resourceful men with a lust in their hearts to explore and to hunt Africa's big game. They were brave men who pitted themselves against the unknown to hunt the vast herds either for a living or a small profit but, most of all, they thrived on the lucrative adventure and the thrill of the chase. With his vivid accounts of the teeming herds swarming across the veld, Capt. William Cornwallis-Harris inspired the aristocratic William Oswell and the unique Gordon Cumming to venture to Africa where they became legends in their own time. Clendennan wrote about the seemingly inexhaustible menagerie of the land in which Charles Baldwin hunted everything from ducks to the mightiest elephants. The land was for those who relish the joy of the chase, the fragrance of woodsmoke and good coffee. Elephants inspired the imagination and their hunting immortalized James Sutherland, Frederick Courtney Selous, William Finaughty, 'Karamajo' Bell, 'Bwakenya' Barnard and countless others. Arguably the most daring and fearless of them all was the unassuming Major P J 'Jungle Man' Pretorius. Of him it was said that if his exploits were a mere work of fiction then they would be a remarkable achievement indeed. His life was a tale of continuous and most extraordinary adventure, of unbelievable incidents and reckless daring. The real motivation of these men was the thrill of the chase in the African bush, and any wealth derived was strictly incidental. They left us a proud history of hunting on this continent that covers a wild and colourful canvas. The uninitiated will argue that these hunters were the forerunners of the wilful slaughter to come which diminished the herds of Africa and that the carnage continued well into the 20th century. While it is true that blazing guns decreased the animal numbers in Africa, the reasonable man would have to admit that the encroachment



Shooting accurately

I believe that anyone can become a good shot with a rifle provided the basics such as good equipment, controlled breathing, sight picture, trigger control and a comfortable position are taken care of.

Starting with the rifle, it is important that the stock, barrel and action be fused together to form an efficient unit enhanced by good sights, be it an iron or scope sight. A fine rifle with a properly mounted scope is like a finely tuned orchestra, each component supporting the other to reach a particular result.

Without proper breath control it is impossible to fire a good shot as the rifle cannot be held steady. Proper breathing when firing a shot is to stop breathing. Breathe normally while you line up the sights and exhale when you are actually sighting. Hold your breath until the shot is fired. In a hunting situation nervousness might tense your muscles and cause irregular breathing which will be detrimental to placing a good shot and it is often the reason for wounding game. In such instances, relax and take deep breaths before taking aim. Only when your breathing is controlled can you purposely align the rifle to confidently fire at the target.

Aiming with a scope is relatively easy. Simply align the crosshairs on the centre of the target maintaining a clear and full sight picture. The scope should not be blurred or darkened at the edges. If the rifle has iron sights, align the front blade with the notch of the rear sight holding the blade level to the top of the notch. On the range, hold the top of the blade under the bull so that it sits on top like a ball but in a hunting situation, the top of the blade must be level with the desired point of impact. Using an aperture, or 'peep' sight, the front post must be seen in the middle of the rear sight.

Holding your breath and aiming carefully, squeeze the trigger to fire the rifle. It is imperative that you do not flinch or lift your head from the stock. You must try to maintain your position throughout and your concentration must remain on the target and not switch to the impending report of the rifle.

All these preparations will be in vain if you do not shoot from a com-