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About the Author

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

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

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

By the same author

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IN A PROVINCE
VENTURE TO THE INTERIOR
THE FACE BESIDE THE FIRE
A BAR OF SHADOW
FLAMINGO FEATHER
THE DARK EYE IN AFRICA
THE LOST WORLD OF THE KALAHARI
THE HEART OF THE HUNTER
THE SEED AND THE SOWER
JOURNEY INTO RUSSIA
THE HUNTER AND THE WHALE
A PORTRAIT OF JAPAN
THE NIGHT OF THE NEW MOON
A STORY LIKE THE WIND

For
Laurens Kuno and John Christian van der Post.
My wife, Ingaret Giffard who edited the book with such concern for its meaning. And in memory of Vetkop (Fat-head) mentioned in *A Story Like the Wind*, and Arrie, a Hottentot who appeared in our lives without preamble of family names or personal history and vanished with Vetkop into the turmoil of the World War, leaving us only with the glow of the natural love they had for children and a dazzle of stories to mark their sojourn among us.

A Far-Off Place

Laurens van der Post

“The story is like the wind,” a Bushman called Xhabbo said.
“It comes from a far-off place and we feel it.”

1974
THE HOGARTH PRESS
LONDON

Prelude

‘A FAR-OFF PLACE’ is a continuation of *A Story Like the Wind*. Yet it is self-contained, so that it can be read on its own provided this much of its predecessor is remembered.

A Story Like the Wind is an account of the life of a boy about to become a man. His name is François Joubert, and he is born in the remote interior of southern Africa. He is the son of Pierre-Paul Joubert, a distinguished educationalist who had been totally ostracised by the European community, because of his emancipated attitude to his black and coloured countrymen. As a result a career to which he is utterly dedicated comes abruptly to an end.

He goes to one of the most inaccessible parts of the country, deep in the north-western bush. There he establishes a vast farming enterprise and tries to make it a model of a larger world to come without discrimination on grounds of race, creed or colour. He deliberately chooses this remote country on the banks of a great river, the Amanzim-tetse, because it is close to the lands of a branch of the great Matabele people, as yet comparatively uncontaminated by contact with European colonial society and still integrated in an authentic primitive pattern of Africa.

The farm is called Hunter’s Drift[fn1] because it is close to where one of the oldest roads in Africa, the Punda-Ma-Tenka, or Hunter’s Road, crosses the river. On this road, even at this late, twentieth-century hour, there is still a constant and colourful flow of human traffic between the settled, increasingly metropolitan Africa of the south and the vast and comparatively untouched interior to the north. The

homestead itself is a contemporary version of the home built by the first Jouberts who fled from the Huguenot persecution in France after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. They had established themselves in 1688 in the then remote uplands of the Cape of Good Hope.

Pierre-Paul persuades an off-shoot of a distinguished Matebele clan living nearby at Osebeni, the Sindabele word meaning a place by the river, to join him in his enterprise, and develop the farm not as paid servants but honoured partners. Hunter's Drift prospers and expands rapidly, because from a railway siding close by it, it supplies a great mining city with most of its meat, fruit, milk and vegetables. His Matabele partners call him 'the great white bird' because his unexpected appearance among them was almost like that of the descent of a rare new bird out of the sky. But in his own household he is known as Ouwa—meaning an old wagon for, as one of the coloured people tells François, his father carries so many people with him through life.

Pierre-Paul is married to a beautiful, highly educated, sensitive, intelligent woman of marked character who fully shares his aspirations. She is never called anything but Lammie, the little lamb, by everyone involved in the Hunter's Drift experiment. The relationship between Lammie and Ouwa is unusually complete. It is almost impossible to imagine an enlargement of the love which it exemplifies. When, many years after their marriage, Françoise is conceived, however surprising it sounds, it is yet understandable why Lammie, in her announcement of the event, refers to it as the "coming of another little person" into their lives.

The consequences of such an approach to their one and only child are as profound as they are subtle in the evolution of François's character. Although Lammie's love of her son is never in doubt, it is hard to know whether the dignity implicit in such a concept is not conferred on François too

soon, and that he might not have welcomed a little less honour and somewhat more immediate and less conceptualised love. As a result, he turns for more spontaneous manifestations of human feelings to the coloured and black people around him.

First of all there is his old nurse, Koba. Koba is a survivor of the cruelly persecuted and almost vanished first people of Africa, the Bushmen. Koba not only brings him up with a passionate, instinctive love but also opens wide his imagination to perhaps the oldest pattern of life to be found in the world today. Indeed he becomes so committed to it that he acquires the difficult clicking Bushman tongue as if it were his own.

Another great source of primitive love in his life is their cook and housekeeper, a large, formidable African lady known to François and his parents as Ousie-—little old mother—Johanna, but to the Matabele she is “The Princess of the Pots”. She is a superb cook, warm-hearted, beloved by all, and makes her kitchen, pantry, larder and quarters in the household a kingdom of her own.

Then there is the hereditary head of the clan who have joined Ouwa at Hunter’s Drift. He is a natural Matabele aristocrat called ’Bamuthi, and becomes in the male sense to François what his old nurse Koba was to him in the female. His influence on François is wide and deep and the love between them as great as it is immediate. There is no corner of the spirit of the emerging man in François where ’Bamuthi’s presence, voice and being is not present, and no shadow in his spirit which is not illuminated by ’Bamuthi’s tender concern for what is unafraid and self-reliant in men.

It is ’Bamuthi who names François “Little Feather,” and Little Feather he is to everyone at Hunter’s Drift, except his parents, to whom in moments of intimacy he becomes Coiske (pronounced Swaske) and in more authoritarian intervals, just François.

Since both François's parents are fully qualified teachers, he is never sent to school but educated entirely in the European sense of the word by his father and mother. In other and equally important underlying levels, however, he is educated in the primitive sense first by Bushman induction of old Koba, then by the example and exhortation of 'Bamuthi and the African children with whom he plays.

This has the result that he moves through the story as a character standing in relation to Africa and its bewildering context of peoples and cultures rather as Kipling's Kim stood to the India of Kipling's day.

As dear and of as great a consequence to François is his relationship with the closest friend of his parents, an almost legendary white hunter turned conservationist, officially styled Colonel H. H. Théron but known far and wide by his African name, Mopani.

The son of a hunter himself, he has had little formal schooling. Almost the only books in his life have been, first the Bible and then books inspired by the Bible, like *Pilgrim's Progress*. His university has really been the bush and veld of Africa. A world war in which he fought as a famous scout has sickened him of killing. He is a frequent visitor to François's home. It is difficult to say who matters most to him, the Ouwa with whom he fought in the war, or Lammie, for whom one suspects he has feelings deeper than he cares to acknowledge, despite some intangible reservations about her concept of François as "another little person."

About his relationship with François, however, there is no doubt. He loves his "little cousin" as he calls François, as if the boy were his heir and successor. From an early age he takes François on long and dangerous patrols against the armed poachers who are always raiding his immense game reserve. He becomes accordingly in European pioneering terms to François what the noble 'Bamuthi is to him in a primitive sense.

He is, moreover, as Ouwa often stresses to Lammie, a poet both in heart and deed, as well as a natural philosopher. As a result, therefore, he has the imagination to transform a highly dangerous confrontation with a rogue elephant of legendary proportions, Uprooter of Great Trees, into a natural ritual of initiation to manhood for François.

Mopani has a habit of arriving at Hunter's Drift on a horse called Noble, always accompanied by two ridgebacks of illustrious pedigree, a great hunting dog called Dingiswayo, or 'Swayo for short, and a bitch called Nandi. This tawny couple are the parents of a puppy which Ouwa brings to François on a cold winter's day, so small that it is hidden for warmth in the pocket of his greatcoat. François calls him Hintza, after a great Amaxosa chief, but for good Bushman reasons he is compelled to call him Hin to his face.

The arrival of Hintza in François's life is a turning point in more ways than one. It marks the moment when he becomes conscious of himself as a person in his own right, and it coincides with the general realisation that Ouwa, his father, is far from well.

Through François's loving, detailed absorption in the education of Hintza he has more and more a life of his own. Yet he cannot ignore a profound dismay as Ouwa's condition grows rapidly worse. It increases when all the doctors and specialists who are consulted can find nothing physically wrong with Ouwa.

Ousie-Johanna, their African cook, is convinced that Ouwa has been bewitched by his European countrymen. So is 'Bamuthi. They both urge François to consult a great African seer and healer who lives some two days' march away through the bush. The seer's name is uLangalibalela, the Right Hon. Sun-is-Hot. François only does so when Lammie, in desperation, takes Ouwa away to the Cape of Good Hope to consult another round of specialists.

On this hazardous journey to uLangalibalela, François and 'Bamuthi come across the first direct evidence that great

and terrible changes in the life of the bush might be imminent. They narrowly escape confrontation with a group of men who are travelling by a little known and obscure route, under command of a Chinese officer, apparently to join African insurgents in the hinterland of Angola. From then on François feels guilty for not telling Mopani about these men. He keeps it secret because he feels that his visit to uLangalibalela might not meet with Mopani's approval.

uLangalibalela immediately diagnoses Ouwa's illness as a curse inflicted on him by "the turning of the backs" of his European countrymen. This "turning of the backs" as the smallest Matabele boy knows, is pronouncement of an infallible sentence of death unless speedily suspended by exercise of great magic. uLangalibalela promises to do all he can to cure Ouwa, in spite of grave misgivings that he has been consulted too late. However, despite all uLangalibalela's efforts, soon after François's return to Hunter's Drift, Mopani arrives with the news that Ouwa has died at the Cape, from no ascertainable cause.

Meanwhile, François has acquired another, even greater secret. Hintza, nearly full-grown, wakes François early one morning and compels him to follow him out in the bush along a narrow track, where every night huge steel lion traps are laid, baited with meat, for the many carnivorous animals who persist in raiding the livestock at Hunter's Drift. They arrive at the lion trap at first light to find caught in it not a lion but a young Bushman, who might have walked out of the dream of the ideal Bushman implanted in François's imagination by his old nurse.

François rescues the Bushman from the trap and has no difficulty, since Koba has taught him the language, in reassuring the badly injured and naturally apprehensive Bushman. He discovers that his name is Xhabbo (the Bushman word for dream). He learns that Xhabbo has just come on a long and dangerous journey from his people in the heart of the great desert, stretching for some fifteen

hundred miles to the west of Hunter's Drift right up to the edge of the Atlantic. He has done so in order to visit a vast cave deep in a hill overlooking the Amanzim-tetse river. The cave, which neither the Matabele nor even François had discovered for themselves, was once both a home to the Bushmen and a kind of temple to their god, the Praying Mantis, before the Matabele invasion of the country compelled them to seek refuge in the desert. Despite generations of exile in the desert, Xhabbo informs François that one or more representatives of his people are compelled to visit the cave from time to time to inform it of important changes in the fortunes of the Bushmen. He himself was on his way to announce to Mantis and all that the cave represents, that his own father had just died and that he, Xhabbo, had now taken over the leadership of his people.

François manages to get Xhabbo into the cave unseen. In the days that follow he succeeds in smuggling sedatives, sleeping draughts, antibiotics and food and drink into the cave and to nurse Xhabbo tenderly until his terrible wound is healed. Since François rescued Xhabbo at first light, when the morning star was high and bright, Xhabbo gives François, who already feels he is somewhat overburdened with names, a Bushman one which is his own special salute for the planet, "Foot of the Day". He adds a great deal to the knowledge François acquired from Koba, above all a phenomenon the Bushmen refer to as "tapping within themselves". This "tapping" appears to be a physical manifestation of a profound gift for intuitive apprehension of the future.

When at last the time comes for Xhabbo to leave he has become such a close and unique friend that François is heart-broken. Xhabbo is equally distressed. As a result, they form a pact that as soon as possible Xhabbo will return to visit François and that he will announce his coming by an unusual combination of the call of the night-plover and the

bark of a jackal. He cannot return openly, of course, because his people still live in peril of all other men.

After Xhabbo has gone, François, out of a devastating sense of bereavement, has an instinct to continue equipping the cave with provisions, food and water, medicines, guns and ammunitions, so that it is always in a state of readiness for Xhabbo's return. He does all this, of course, in great secrecy and this secret, like that regarding the "insurgents," keeps his Huguenot conscience in a state of unease. Yet he sees no way of sharing either of these secrets, even with Mopani.

At the same time both François and 'Bamuthi are increasingly perturbed by strange new traffic along the Punda-Ma-Tenka road, across the ford at Hunter's Drift and on into the even more remote interior to the north and north-west. There are several ominous encounters with aggressive African truck drivers, and one occasion on which François catches a glimpse of what he believed to be the face of a Chinese "officer". They are also perturbed by visits of strange European priests whom Ousie-Johanna calls "the crows of God" and who purport to be representatives of the World Council of Christian Churches, on their way to help the struggle of repressed African peoples against their European oppressors.

Mopani adds to their general disquiet by pointing out to François how even the birds in the bush have "changed their tune" and how this only happened when great destructive elements appeared to threaten the natural life of the bush.

At this strange, uneasy moment another and more welcome change occurs. A new neighbour arrives, a distinguished colonial governor, Sir James Archibald Sinclair Monckton, K.C.M.G., D.S.C., B.A. (Cantab.). As a young district commissioner, he had fallen in love with the country of the Amanzim-tetse river and bought a concession of land next to Hunter's Drift. Now retired, he has decided to develop his concession and to build there a new home for

himself and his young daughter. He is a widower. His wife, a young Portuguese woman, the daughter of a colonial governor, was killed a few years before in northern Angola where an “army of liberation” poured out of the bush one morning and massacred some thirty-four thousand people, of whom only a few thousand were Portuguese. François, who encounters the Moncktons in the bush on his way from Mopani’s reserve to Hunter’s Drift, finds the daughter Luciana the most attractive and lovely person he has ever seen, but tends to be incapable of understanding or knowing precisely how to respond to her, because she is the first European girl he has ever met.

Luciana, barely adolescent, is in the charge of a formidable sort of Portuguese Ousie-Johanna, a governess called Amelia. François spends some of his happiest days introducing Luciana to the life of the bush, sharing some of the things he and Hintza treasure most. He shows her a “baboon finishing school” and animals so familiar and dear that they are almost personified and carry human names like the great male lions, Chaliapin and Caruso, and a lioness with a passion for being left alone, called Garbo. One bird, in particular, an African partridge called a francolin, is held up to her as the bravest of the brave, as he discovers her barely visible in the hissing grass, defending her clutch of eggs with the transparent armour of utter silence, immobility and stillness, an example of courage and total acceptance of danger and fear that never leaves the two of them.

Overjoyed that Luciana and her father are going to be permanent neighbours on land which her father calls Silverton Hill, François and Mopani are amazed by the sense of order and speed with which Sir James sets about building his new home. He is helped in this by seven-ox-wagon loads of Cape-coloured builders and artisans and their vivid gypsy families. He feels desperately bereaved when Sir James is suddenly recalled to Britain to serve on a Royal Commission

and takes Luciana out of his life so soon after she had entered it.

Although François is not aware of it, he has had as great an impact on Luciana as she on him. She writes to François constantly, sends Hintza a metal-studded collar for his protection and François a painting of the patron saint of hunters, St. Hubert. Despite his Huguenot prejudices, François takes the painting to Xhabbo's cave and installs it there. Just above the painting there is a red cross painted on the rock long ago by a Bushman artist.

From then on the indefinable feeling of menace in the life of the bush builds up. The tension caused in François by Luciana's absence, and above all by the failure of Xhabbo to return, becomes almost unbearable. It is all the more acute because Lammie, now in sole command of Hunter's Drift, threatens to send him away for his education. Secretly he is determined that he will not leave until he has seen Xhabbo at least once more.

This tension, both in the bush and in François is at its highest when Sir James, Amelia and Luciana return unexpectedly after the absence of more than a year. Everyone at Hunter's Drift is overjoyed. Both Luciana and François, too, are excited to see Lammie and Sir James, who had not met before, taking a great liking to each other.

Luciana, by this time, had ceased to be "Luciana" to François. He had given her a name of his own—Nonnie—which literally means "little mistress." The day of reunion ends with one of Ousie-Johanna's best dinners, complete with the finest wine and brandy from the great cellar under the house. The meal goes on for so long that Nonnie is peremptorily ordered to bed. But not before she and François have reaffirmed their secret pact to meet at dawn for their first excursion into the bush.

François, however, is woken well before dawn by Hintza. Even half-asleep François recognises Xhabbo's pre-arranged call sign of night-plover and then jackal. He jumps out of

bed immediately and is dressing as fast as he can when the call comes again in a way which suggests that it is of imperative, even desperate import. As he dashes out of his room, gun in hand, a torch flashes in his face and he finds Nonnie, fully dressed, waiting for him. The excitement at the prospect of accompanying François into the bush has woken her earlier than arranged. He has no option but to tell her to follow. As he speaks, the call sign breaks again on the silence.

Soon they are all three outside, and Hintza leads them in the direction from which the call had come, so fast that they have to run to keep up with him. Hintza leads them parallel to the river towards the hill of Xhabbo's cave. On the way, François thinks he sees an ominous mass of something moving by the river half behind them, but has no time to stop and observe it closer, because at that moment the call is repeated more urgently than ever.

Almost at once he finds himself in the presence of Xhabbo, who wastes no time in formal greetings, but commands them to follow him. He leads them fast and straight up the hill and into shelter just behind the great boulder which hides the entrance to the cave. There François and Nonnie meet Xhabbo's Nuin-Tara, "daughter of a star," who Xhabbo describes as his "utterly woman." He then tells François how he and Nuin-Tara have travelled for many, many days, marching by night and hiding by day, to come and warn him that thousands of armed Africans were coming from the north-west to attack Hunter's Drift and invade the country beyond.

At that moment they hear the great voice of 'Bamuthi calling out, pure and unafraid, the Matabele equivalent of the medieval knight's "To me!" and hard on that, an outburst of automatic rifle fire. This is followed immediately by a piercing blast on military whistles all round the homestead, and then the full discharge of sustained rifle and automatic fire from hundreds of infantrymen.

Xhabbo wants them all to withdraw into the cave at once, but François refuses. He announces that whatever happens he at least must answer ’Bamuthi’s call. Nuin-Tara and Nonnie are therefore made to go into the cave and Xhabbo and François carefully make their way into the bush where they find several African soldiers in uniform lying dead in the track, and not far away the body of ’Bamuthi. They are prevented from retreating to the cave itself immediately, both because the bush itself is now swarming with soldiers, and because they find the body of a mortally wounded Matabele kinsman of ’Bamuthi’s, a man called Mtunwya, (Messenger) also one of François’s beloved companions. They manage to hide the wounded Mtunwya in a ledge under the rocks where François had once given Xhabbo a provisional shelter.

Mtunwya tells François that he believes that every man, woman and child at Hunter’s Drift, whether European or Matabele, has been killed and that Sir James himself has been shot down in the doorway of François’s home. Mtunwya dies late in the day with his hand in François’s, and it is only towards sunset that Xhabbo and François manage to make their way safely up the hill again to the cave, where they find Nuin-Tara and Nonnie, beside herself with fear, shock and anxiety.

For a moment they all stand there as the last light of a red, mythological sunset dies away and they see the stars appear, and as the stars appear an extraordinary display of meteors flashing out of the sky, so that Xhabbo is moved to say to François,

“Xhabbo knew that the stars who hide in light as do other things hide in darkness were there to see all today. For the stars do fall in this manner when our hearts fall down . . . and that they must, falling, go to tell other people that a bad thing has happened at another place. Tell this utterly your woman, Foot of the Day, that the stars are acting thus on account of us and that we are not alone.”

Xhabbo pauses until François has told Nonnie and, in the telling, notices how the tension goes out of the hand in his. Hintza, too, is still, his head on one side, listening. Then they see Xhabbo pointing high, and hear him say, “Look, Foot of the Day, how those stars which have not fallen over are full of a tapping as I, Xhabbo, am full of a tapping. And their tapping is joined to Xhabbo’s tapping, seeking to tell me of the way we must go. I must go into the cave and sit apart, listening utterly to this tapping, in order to learn of this way we must go.”

So *A Story Like the Wind* ends with Xhabbo, Nuin-Tara, Nonnie and Hintza crawling into the cave and François going last, as the book says, like someone turning for help to the last temple left on earth. *A Far-off Place* takes up the story at this point.

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fn1 Ford

CHAPTER ONE

The Owl and the Cave

SO GREAT AND deep a cave, of course, had to be dark. But it was even darker than François had expected when he crawled through the narrow entrance. Then he could tell from the feel of the sand underneath his hands that he was inside it in depth. He looked carefully all round him but could see nothing to indicate the presence of Xhabbo, Nuin-Tara and Nonnie. Were it not for Hintza, who as always, unless ordered away, was close to him, he could easily have thought himself to be alone. The darkness, indeed, was so dense that it was almost tangible and as he stood up, silently and slowly, his left hand brushed the air in front of his face as if to clear the black matter from his eyes. It was a most unpleasant feeling, as if this profound darkness round him had found an ally in the darkness within inflicted on them all by the tragic events of the day. The whole was not just a sensation conveyed by the senses but a powerful emotion arguing with the voice of despair that the last light was about to be extracted from life on earth.

Fortunately François, who so often before had had to find his way through the dark in the bush, knew that the glimpse of a distant fire, or the striking of a match, was enough to blind one's eyes for a moment to such light as there always was even in the blackest of cloud-covered nights. In remembering this, the alliance of darkness without and darkness within was broken, and he realised, with relief, that the cave appeared so impenetrably and solidly black

because for the moment he was star-blind. More, it was almost as if he were star-deaf as well.

The intense and varied sounds which had accompanied the quick, piercing, dancing, starlight as it assailed their eyes from above when the five of them had been standing outside, had made, as it were, a single orchestra of cosmic proportions. First there had been the abiding background noise of the sea of darkness, breaking like a Pacific swell over a great barrier reef to produce the star spume and foam of light which men call the Milky Way. There, on what might be the beach of the universe, the horses of the seas of night perpetually pound with their lacquered hooves. All around were the millions of stars and satellites that produce the quick “tapping sound” to which Xhabbo had referred. There were some stars that naturally arranged themselves in triangles and sent out a kind of rhythmic tinkling to synchronise with the many that in one vast, wheeling movement let the blackness rushing by use them as wind instruments. The greatest, like Sirius, Aldebaran and the Santauries, stretched their wings of light taut between Heaven and earth to give each according to its nature, the violins, harps and ’cellos of this orchestra. There were star voices, too, to swell the volume like those of children lost in some deep valley in the mountains of the night, singing to keep up their courage. Then came the reassuring responses from the great stars such as the Three Kings, the Seven Sisters, Heavenly Twins and the vortex of Andromeda. Yet there in the cave, all this sound which had accompanied the light outside was suddenly and totally extinguished, and this made the silence as solid and opaque as the darkness.

François listened in vain for some whisper or whisk of movement to tell him where his companions were. Then instinctively, he put his hands in his pockets, took out the matches he always carried and struck one.

Even then he did not see at once any of the others. Perhaps because he was intent on lighting the candles

which had stood there so long by the altar of pebbles below the painting of St. Hubert and the sign of the cross on the walls of the cave. Quickly, before the fragile light of the match could go out (for already some new awareness in him was warning him that even trifles like matches could no longer be wasted), he hastened to the candles and managed to light them just before the match faded. To him, the light growing from the two black wicks until their flames stood clear-cut and straight, was beautiful.

Turning away from the candles he saw, over the back of Hintza, first of all Nonnie, her eyes darker and wider than ever, and fixed on the candles as if not certain she could believe they were real. Beyond her, Xhabbo and Nuin-Tara, squatting side by side on the floor of the cave, turning their faces, alive with wonder and delight at what was to them (since they had never seen candles before), such magic of light. However it was Nonnie who caught François's attention. Her whole attitude as she stood there looked so slight, forlorn, so very much too young for the tragedy inflicted on her that day. The shock of the disaster held her like someone in a profound trance and left her poised exactly on the frontier where candle-light ended and line of ink of the cave began. Indeed, he was so moved by the eloquence of her plight that he forgot his own and was about to go to her when her whole expression suddenly changed.

For the first time since morning her spirit seemed capable of detaching itself from the horror of the day and to come alive. At the same time she must have noticed the red cross on the wall above the candles for slowly she herself made a sign of the cross, as if she were unconsciously imitating the movement of the hand which many thousands of years before had painted it on those ancient honey-coloured walls of stone.

Clasping her hands together in front of her, she said as if speaking to herself: "Oh, how wonderful! How could I have

spent a whole day in this place and not noticed it before?”

It was an indication perhaps of how death, the sudden crumbling of a world and a way of life which all had seemed so real that one could be pardoned for having been deluded into thinking they would endure for ever, could abolish with unbelievable swiftness any desire in the human spirit to maintain appearances. For then Nonnie did something which she would never have done before except in the privacy of her room or in the protective context of a church. She went up to François’s home-made little shrine and knelt down in front of it to pray. She did not speak but merely stayed on her knees, her hands clasped in her lap, while she looked deeply and long into the copy of the painting which she had chosen for François a year ago on one bright summer day in a Europe which, at that moment, must have seemed to her more like something experienced in a dream than in measurable reality.

François did not know precisely what was happening but the meaning of the act was plain enough and too important to be interrupted. He turned to look at Xhabbo and Nuin-Tara. Their glances met his and told him that, although they might not know what was happening to Nonnie, they realised it was something which should be respected with silence. All the same, to make it quite certain, François moved silently over to join them where they sat against the far wall directly behind Nonnie, motioning to Hintza to come to him as he did so. Putting his head close to Xhabbo’s, he whispered so low that the sound could not possibly have carried any further: “I think she is listening in to a tapping of her own.” He put it like that because he knew it to be the only way in which Xhabbo would understand an act of prayer.

Xhabbo immediately leaned sideways and repeated softly to Nuin-Tara what François had whispered to him. Both turned as one to François. Their eyes were like old Koba’s, his Bushman nurse, full and overflowing with the first light

of human life on earth, but still now brighter with understanding and approval.

Xhabbo spoke almost inaudibly for them both: “She has gone utterly to the place for such a listening. For look, Foot of the Day, the sign on the wall!”

Xhabbo was not only pointing at the cross above picture and candles, but going on to describe with his right hand stretched out, first a long horizontal movement from left to right, and then another with the palm vertical moving from high above, downwards, to make what seemed to François a perfectly symmetrical cross. “That sign is the sign we Bushmen, since the days of the People of the Early Race, have always made at the place where asking and tapping meet. Xhabbo too is going presently to sit by himself listening utterly for the tapping to tell of the way we shall have to go.”

As if knowing how in those cataclymsmic moments no words are as eloquent as physical contact, he hooked the little finger of his right hand in François’s little finger, as the finger of his left was already hooked in Nuin-Tara’s. François instinctively put his other hand lightly on Hintza’s head, and the four of them went on sitting there with their eyes on Nonnie, as if she were leading them in some profound ritual of communion. So totally excluded was the world of appearance and illusion that not only was François not at all embarrassed, but felt as if this were the only possible preliminary to finding a way out of the terrible peril and unknowingness which now held them far more inexorably than that terrible lion trap in the track without had once held Xhabbo.

How long they sat there it was impossible to tell because in the manner of all meaningful things the moment vanished like the shadow of a dream. It seemed to him that time was only a flash of lightning between the moment when Nonnie had sat down on her knees and began to get up. Then suddenly from the main opening in the ceiling of the cave,

there came the loud, prolonged and whistling, night-sea call of an owl.

It was a sound François knew well but familiarity could not deprive it of its aboriginal freshness. Always it seemed to carry some new tone, some fresh meaning for him. Of all the calls of the many species of owls of the bush, this one, however uncomfortable and unendingly evocative, was his favourite. Quick, therefore, to identify the call, he had barely done so when the call was repeated more loudly and urgently, as if the owl had its head in the opening above them and were calling directly down at them.

Nonnie, who had obviously never heard the sound before, was on her feet at once and turned round quickly looking strangely startled. However as the call was repeated a third time, François was happy to notice that it was only the suddenness of the sound which had startled her, and not its nature.

She asked, more in wonder than dismay: “What’s that? What can it possibly be, calling to us like that?”

The sound of her voice released Xhabbo and Nuin-Tara from their self-imposed vow of silence. They too jumped to their feet and rushed up to Nonnie doing what François knew was a little dance of gladness in front of her. This puzzled her even more than the sound of the owl, for she looked bewildered and turned her eyes to François for help.

François did not know how to explain because he feared any explanation could only reawaken her sadness. For what Xhabbo and Nuin-Tara were calling out to Nonnie while doing their gay little dance of joy in front of her, was: “They have arrived! The owl says, ‘they have arrived’!”

The “they” referred to, of course, were not only Sir James and Amelia, but Lammie, Ousie-Johanna, ’Bamuthi and all the many others who had been massacred that day. Both words and dance were Xhabbo’s and Nuin-Tara’s way of informing Nonnie that this particular owl, in its role of messenger of the dead which is given to it by the Bushmen,

had come specially to tell her that the journey of all those killed to the day beyond death had been safely accomplished. They clearly believed the news would comfort her as it had gladdened them. But François had a special reason of his own to be overawed by the intrusion of the owl in their lives at that moment. For the owl possessed the onomatopoeic African name of “Sephookoo-koo”, but his own people called it the “Nonnietjie-owl”—in other words, the “Little Nonnie owl”, so that even the name seemed to support the Bushman interpretation that the owl was there as a private and personal messenger from the dead.

The coincidence was too overwhelming to be kept secret. So François went to Nonnie, took her gently by the arm and led her to the side of the cave where they had all been sitting, made her sit beside him and explained as best he could. Xhabbo and Nuin-Tara joined them to listen intently as if they understood every word of his English.

To his relief, Nonnie listened with increasing interest so that he was encouraged into giving her not only the Bushman interpretation but told her all he knew about the owl, how in the far south for instance, it preferred to make its home in church steeples or tombs. Here in the bush where steeples and graveyards were lacking, it sought out hermit-like holes or caves in the cliffs. Significantly, if those were lacking, it would take over the abandoned nests of that strange water bird, the hammerhead. François explained that he used the word “significant” because the hammerhead, according to the Bushmen, was chief reporter of the supernatural. Always it was to be seen on its way from its nest to the water at the first glimmer of light, and then on its way back again at dusk and so was ideally cast for its role as an observer of all that passed between night and day.

At that moment, Xhabbo, who already seemed to know from their expression and tone the meaning of the exchange between them, interrupted. He was obviously concerned

that François and Nonnie should not underrate the message the owl had brought them. He explained that while they had all been standing outside the cave, he had noticed that when the first great shooting star “fell over on its side”, a big hammerhead rose up from the river below and made its way ponderously to the cliffs where the kind of owl they had just heard nested. The hammerhead (Xhabbo’s tone and earnestness of manner were begging François to believe him) did this because, looking deep into the water as it did all day long, it saw things which human eyes could not see. Above all, in the gathering darkness when water was the only sheen of light left on earth, it would note any reflections of things that lived only between night and day. No star could shine or “fall over on its side” at that brief hour without the bird seeing it, and seeing it, it would know too that somewhere someone who also had been upright, had fallen over utterly on his side. The moment it saw that, it would hasten to tell the owls because they were the only birds who had eyes big enough to see right through the night. The appointed owl then would watch and watch until the “fallen-over thing” emerged upright again from night into day and then would fly to the right place where people listening in to the “tapping” could be told of the news. Having been told now, Xhabbo pleaded, it would be wrong for François and Nonnie not to be glad.

François translated all this, told in much greater detail than recorded here, and it was extraordinary how in the telling what the civilised world would have dismissed as superstition consoled the two of them. For the first time, they both seemed able to externalise the tragic day.

Nonnie, who had not been content merely to hold on to François’s little finger but had put her arm through his to move as close as possible against him for reassurance, exclaimed bravely, “Oh, how wonderful, I would never have thought that anything like this could make any sense at all. But you know, François, what your friend has just told us,

the call of the owl, that picture I bought for you in Paris, the candles, the altar and that cross you painted above them, all seem suddenly to fall into place and belong to one another and force one to accept everything your friend has just said. And it was very sweet of you, considering you are such a desperate old Huguenot, to have put that idolatrous cross on the wall."

For the first time there was just the faintest suggestion of teasing in Nonnie's voice, as if her spirit which, as Xhabbo would have put it, "had so utterly fallen over", had not only picked itself up but was beginning, newly born like a child, to make its first tentative essay into walking upright again. It seemed indeed so brave that François was moved almost to tears. He pressed her arm closer against him and it was some little while before the respect for truth and nothing but the truth, which suffering and disaster bring to the human spirit and which is perhaps one of the main reasons why life calls upon both so often in so complex a measure, compelled him to say: "But I'm sorry, Nonnie. I didn't paint that cross. I would like to think I might have done it if it hadn't been there, but I doubt it. No, I put your picture and the candles there as you asked because the cross was already there."

Nonnie's eyes widened with a surprise close to unbelief as she remarked, "It was already there? I didn't know that any Christian missionaries had ever come as far as this. How amazing! Please tell me more."

François shook his head. "No, Nonnie, no Christian missionaries did it. In fact, no Europeans except you and I have ever been in this cave. That sign of the cross was painted by one of the artists who painted these paintings all round you. And do you know, there's something even stranger. That cross was painted long, long before the crucifixion. I know that, because my father told me that there are other places in Africa with the same sign painted on stone thousands of years before the coming of Christ.

Xhabbo only just told me that ever since the days of the people of the early race, Bushmen have painted that sign of the cross to mark places where their asking, in moments of despair, and what they call the answer and the asking-in-tapping meet."

"The tapping?" Nonnie looked so bewildered that François hastened to explain.

"It's their way of saying that they have sounds within," he said, "that tell them of things the eye cannot see, even things before they happen, so that they can know what to do about them, much in the same way as your Joan of Arc heard voices within her telling her what to do."

This helped Nonnie so much that she wanted him to go on, and he would have done so, because he too was beginning to feel less abandoned in the process. He was finding what other civilised human beings have found in moments of disaster, in the thunder of avalanches and voice of storms at sea, that when all the many subtle, complex and impressive devices they have contrived for their security and intelligence against unpredictable forces of nature have all broken down, there is organic in the natural world around them another system to which their long-rejected instincts compel them to turn for guidance. The great trouble then is that this natural system is encoded in symbols on which the world has long since turned its back, as it did on Ouwa, and, in the turning, lost the key to the cypher. Yet, thanks to 'Bamuthi and the pagan world of his childhood, thanks above all to Koba, François had his own access to the system. Above all in Xhabbo he had perhaps the greatest expert alive in this radar of meaning, built into every living being, navigating on courses of fire through the life of the dark bush around him, achieving its most comprehensive telegraphic intelligence in what Xhabbo called "tapping".

Some realisation of all this produced an inrush of warmth to François which must have communicated itself to Nonnie,

for why otherwise should she then have pressed closer to him and said in a very small voice, “I may not know precisely what your friend means by his tapping, but whatever it means, tapping, shooting stars, cross, your hammerhead, owl and all, I thank them and believe they’ll help.”

Perhaps the clearest indication of how much they were already helping was that for the first time then François realised that none of them had had anything to eat or drink that day. One must not create the impression that he was as hungry and thirsty as he would have normally felt after so long a period of abstinence. The most that can be said for certain is that he was aware of the need for them all to make some effort now to eat and drink. Accordingly he started to extract his arm gently from Nonnie’s as a preliminary to getting up and going to his secret store of food. The movement sent a shudder of alarm through Nonnie. Something akin to bewilderment possessed her that François should be so insensitive as not to realise how necessary such nearness was to her at that moment: indeed so precious that the thought of doing without it even for a brief moment, in the face of a future in which she would now be deprived of all other living contacts, on which she had depended from childhood, was unendurable. Her grip on François’s arm tightened. It was all she could do to hold back a cry of protest close to hysteria. Luckily François seemed to understand what was happening to her, very largely because he himself did not want to be separate and alone just then, and was acting purely under a compulsion of will.

“I shan’t be a minute,” he told Nonnie, as he once used to tell Hintza on such occasions when he was still an anxious little puppy, “but I think it’s time we thought about food and drink.”

He paused because the explanation of his action was so remote from anything Nonnie had anticipated, and in any

case she had never felt less like eating in her life. However, she made a face at him which made him smile before he added: “Yes, I know. I don’t feel like food either although I could do with a drink. I have never felt so thirsty, ever. But I promise you, we have just got to make an effort to eat. We’ll need all the strength we’ve got. Besides, we’ll feel the better for it. You know, Mopani has often told me that always in the war, just before going into action, when he and his men felt that food was the last thing on earth they wanted, he would force them all to eat because eating helped even more than prayer would have done. And for somebody as religious as Mopani, Nonnie, I promise, that was some admission.”

Nonnie repressed an inner exclamation: “But oh God, how like a man to think like that and leave one when one needs them to hold on most! How is one ever to make him understand?”

She did not notice that her imagination in one startled upward flight had promoted François to manhood. She let him go as if some intuition were compelling her not to fail to match any step of his towards maturity and she watched him intently, almost as if seeing him for the first time, while he explained to Xhabbo and Nuin-Tara what he was about. Listening to that quick electric sound of Bushman, clicking and crackling so easily and lightly on their lips, she felt like a child having her first lesson in some kindergarten for schooling the Ruth that is always in woman alone in an alien world. That too was of some astringent help and she was almost sorry when Xhabbo put an end to the conversation by vigorously nodding his head, getting up and going with François to vanish into the darkness at the far end of the cave. Soon they were back, each carrying a haversack full of things that they started unpacking on to the floor of the cave, half-way between where she was sitting and the candles against the wall.