

Contents

Cover

About the book

Also by Laurens van der Post

Dedication

Title Page

Preamble

The Coming of Mantis

The Place and the Season

Envoy Extraordinary

Mantis Follows Through

Hans Taaibosch at Home

The Great Divide

Dance of the Great Hunger

Walk-about

The Carol

Strange Jerusalem

Copyright

About the Book

Since his first novel, *In a Province*, was published by the Hogarth Press in 1934, Laurens van der Post's books have made a profound impact on readers throughout the English-speaking world, and in many foreign-language editions. One after the other they have been admired for their brilliant descriptive writing, their imaginative insight and their compelling narrative power. His recent recognition by the Book Marketing Council as one of the twenty 'Best of British' writers is but one of the countless tributes that have been paid to his work.

Presented together now for the first time, Laurens van der Post's collected writings will reveal as never before the fullness of his perceptive, wise and remarkably consistent vision. In all of them his inspiration has been that of an adventurous pioneer exploring not just the outward aspects of a turbulent and troubled world but, at a deeper level, the patterns and paradoxes of human life, the myths and dreams of the human mind, the values and cultures of different peoples, the elusive springs of our own people.

Also by Laurens van der Post

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
THE NIGHT OF THE NEW MOON
A STORY LIKE THE WIND
A FAR-OFF PLACE
A MANTIS CAROL
JUNG AND THE STORY OF OUR TIME
FIRST CATCH YOUR ELAND
YET BEING SOMEONE OTHER
A WALK WITH A WHITE BUSHMAN

With photographs by Burt Glinn

A PORTRAIT OF JAPAN
A PORTRAIT OF ALL THE RUSSIAS

*To the memory of Martha Jaeger as well as MAT who was
in prison with me and left it for such a walk-about, spirit
unembittered, and heart intact.*

A Mantis Carol

Laurens van der Post

'And always mantis would have a dream,' they told me in the desert, 'and the dream would show him what to do.'

Chatto & Windus

LONDON

THE COLLECTED WORKS OF LAURENS VAN DER POST



A MANTIS CAROL

Preamble

THIS IS A true story which may well appear stranger than fiction, since the truth unhappily, from the point of view of those who try to serve it, is always more than literal or statistical fact. Indeed, the writer who would warm such cold, literal and statistical clay with life finds himself inevitably involved in some sort of alchemical approach to his subject, since life and the living of it, for all our knowing, is still as great a mystery at its end as it was in its beginning. As fast as our knowledge expands to the rim of the unknown, the mystery at heart forms another horizon compelling the known to keep to the same respectful distance again.

None of this atmosphere of mystery which may preside over this story, therefore, is any of my intention or invention, but something imposed on me by the nature of the living pattern with which this story is concerned, and the task of making it live for others as it lived for me. Though I have tried to tell it with due respect for its literal and statistical fact, an air of the mysterious must remain because of the inevitable limitation of words in expressing the inexpressible. Awareness and articulation, despite the logic of positivism and the philosophy of semantics, are not synonymous. Each one of us is aware of far more than he can ever express. We all know more than we allow ourselves to know because of a certain cowardice in face of the inexpressible, and fear of accepting its effect on us as guide to the nature of its reality. Yet those who can persuade themselves to be guided thus in their pursuit of the totality of truth find themselves rewarded not so much by a

surrender of any significant part of the essential mystery, as by its transformation into something accessible as living wonder.

None the less, whether mystery or wonder, this element present in the events recorded here is so strong that it is necessary to stress that the people concerned in telling are not imaginary but real. I have even used their own names whenever possible, and suppressed and changed them only when I have not known them or thought I might give embarrassment.

Above all, Hans Taaibosch is the name under which the principal character came into the story. To my everlasting regret, I could not discover the name I suspect he must have had originally. Yet I underline the fact that I used the one name by which he was known in the slight hope that, somewhere, someone may possibly remember how he came to get it and, even if incapable of telling us more than that about him, may be grateful for this opportunity to give him the salute he merits as he is dismissed for the last time from his own ground of parade as a private soldier of life who served it, I believe, far above and beyond the call of duty.

The Coming of Mantis

ALTHOUGH THIS STORY is as complete as anything can ever be in an human awareness bound to its miniscule ration of life in the here and now, I still have only to think of it to find it as mysterious as some midnight visitation. Yet none of this was apparent to me for a long time. The beginning in itself appeared a trivial part of the routine traffic of my working life and I did not imagine at the time that it could possibly possess any extra-territorial connections for me. Insignificant as it was, so without obvious substance of any special import that it corresponded almost to the Euclidian definition of a point as that which has no size or magnitude but only position, I did not realize then, as I do now, that position in mind and spirit as well as within the unfolding process of our expanding universe is more important than size, or I might have taken greater notice of the event. I might have realized that even on such an intangible scale something extraordinary was moving into position in my life, had I taken heed of some of the coincidences which followed the positioning and accompanied its evolution.

This was perhaps the most reprehensible lapse of all, for some instinct has prevented me from ever finding coincidences accidental. I had come gradually to think of them as manifestations of some cosmic law of which we are inadequately aware, confirming among many other things the extent to which one's own life was obedient to an overwhelming universal pattern. I had even reached at that precise moment the place in the book I was writing where I was trying to suggest that this great veiled law with its special messengers of strange, often absurd parallels disturbing our highly organized allegiance to a rational and causal progression of things, could be the law governing the growth of meaning in our lives, the kind of meaning which the Chinese centuries before Christ defined as that which has always existed through itself. I can only excuse the lapse by the fact that I was working hard on the successor

to my book *The Lost World of the Kalahari*, which meant even more to me and which was growing too slowly for my liking from the seed of its title, *The Heart of the Hunter*.

My apprenticeship to the cause of the theme of these two books had been long and hard. I had just behind me, for instance, nearly five years of exploration of the great known, unknown of the Kalahari desert of southern Africa, including a long expedition into the heart of that great wasteland to find some remnants of the vanished first people of my native country, the Bushmen of southern Africa, in order not only to live with them but also to learn from them. As a result my life and mind were so conditioned as to have room for little else when, as I now see it, the story began to probe so unobtrusively for its own position in my life.

When the letter which started it all arrived from America, I put it on one side for ten days before opening it, so incapable did I feel of finding a place in my mind for its contents. In case this sounds exaggerated, I may add that a few letters a day from friends and people one loves may be a joy, but at such a moment the twenty to thirty envelopes that came through my door each morning were a form of torture. When I came at last reluctantly to open this particular letter it was not without feelings of guilt which made me overlook the fact that its contents also coincided with what I was doing.

The letter was from an unknown woman in New York. She asked if I could help her to understand an image which had recurred in her dreams over many years. In the last five years it had recurred with increasing frequency and indeed, at the time of writing her letter, was happening almost nightly. She said that she was an analytical psychologist and had learned from her vocation that human beings neglected their dreams, particularly recurring dreams, at their peril. Accordingly she had given all the understanding of which she was capable to determine the purpose of this recurrent

image. This image was always that of a praying mantis. She had, she declared, never seen a praying mantis, but when the dream came to her she had read all she could about them and looked up illustrations in libraries and allusions to them in literature, but could discover nothing whatsoever to account for the appearance in her dreaming mind of an insect she had never encountered or given any conscious thought to.

She had consulted eminent colleagues in the United States, London and Zürich and even a great Zen Buddhist scholar in Japan whom, although I did not know it then, I was to meet with her in the course of the progression of this story.

Her failure to arrive at some understanding of the phenomenon, despite the efforts of all these years, implied that it must be a totally haphazard, random and meaningless intrusion in the imagery of her spirit. This was the truly agonizing aspect of it all which haunted her more and more, because it challenged a basic axiom of her faith and made a nonsense of her considerable experience of human psychology. Nothing, however trivial or absurd its appearance, she believed, could possibly come up unbidden out of the darkness of the human mind, as this praying mantis had done, without carrying a charge of as yet unrecognized meaning peculiarly its own, seeking flesh and blood, brave and caring enough to live it.

She was in despair until two months before writing, when someone from Japan sent her a book of mine on Africa. She read it with a strange absurd feeling of having been there already, and noted with a sudden inrush of hope all that I had written about the praying mantis, and how it had once been called 'the god of the Hottentots of Africa' but in reality had been, and still was, the god of the Bushmen of southern Africa. Could I perhaps help her to find some understanding of this dream theme conducted in her

sleeping self by a praying mantis that refused to go away? She signed herself Martha Jaeger.

Since this is not fiction but a true story I give her real name. She is not only dead and cannot be embarrassed by any personal references, but also I am certain, having come to know her well, that she would not have resented mention of her name since it was significant within itself and constituted another of those coincidences which I ignored at the time.

I take her surname first because it is the name she was born to and it represents as nearly as a single word can all the life immemorial that had gone into the making of her as the woman she was. Jaeger is the German for hunter. No name could ever have suited her nature better. The hunter in human imagination everywhere serves as a plenipotentiary of that part of the human personality which is always, whether we know it or not, in search of new and greater meaning. That is why I believe, for instance, we are so moved when Baudelaire, in what is perhaps the finest of his poems, speaks of art as a call on the horn of hunters lost in the great woods.

Martha Jaeger was a born and, to the end of her life, a dedicated hunter in this sense, not of big game but of great meaning. Moreover, the Bushman for whom the mantis of which she was constantly dreaming was god, was and is, in the purest and most exclusive use of the term, a hunter. And yet there I was staring at the name of Jaeger on my desk in the process of writing a book called *The Heart of the Hunter*, thinking only with a sigh of regret that I would have to make time now to answer yet another letter.

Then there was her own private personal name, Martha. The first Martha, as Kipling in a poem devoted to her implies so poignantly even if not without characteristic extravagance, was the mother of sons condemned to work in darkness, unlike the sons of Mary who were children of the light. The Bushmen metaphorically were sons of Martha,