RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

The Hunter and the Whale

Laurens van der Post

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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.

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 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

With photographs by Burt Glinn

A PORTRAIT OF JAPAN
A PORTRAIT OF ALL THE RUSSIAS

Dedicated to
INGARET GIFFARD

The Hunter and the Whale

A Story

Laurens van der Post

Chatto & Windus
LONDON

“Y sobre el mar la sangre se extendia
Como un manto de purpura flotante.”

From *El Arponero*
by S. A. LILLO

“And on the sea the blood spreads out
Like a crimson mantle floating . . .”

CHAPTER ONE

A Matter of Luck

THERE WAS NO one in the *Kurt Hansen* when I boarded her that Saturday evening for my fourth season as a spotter with the Norwegian whaling fleet based on Port Natal. As the ship which had held the record the past three years for the greatest number of catches, she occupied the obvious place of honour: immediately alongside the quay and at the head of the line of twenty-four whalers, moored three abreast in the crowded harbour. Like the rest of the little ships, she appeared in that restricted berth even smaller than usual.

Her crow's-nest, which, when I occupied it on watch at sea, always seemed to me to stick out so far above the water, now barely cleared the stern rail of the purple Royal Mail steamer which had called in at dawn that morning, in a hurry as usual, and now, with fires undrawn in her boilers, was lying almost against the *Kurt Hansen*'s nose, trembling with impatience to be off again.

At the other end of the line of whalers rose the black bow, tall saffron masts and long black funnel, topped off with two thin bands of red, of the *Clan MacGillivray*, a bulky turretship, whose Blue Peter, hoisted limp in the still air, signified that she was about to resume her beat for freight around the world. Beyond both mail ship and tramp rose the funnels and masts of many other vessels, their flags flapping like household dusters on the sky-line, and all anointed and shining with the yellow of the sinking sun. As I

knew, there was not a single hull in this great concourse of shipping that did not exceed the combined tonnage of the fleet to which the *Kurt Hansen* belonged. Indeed one could easily have had the impression of pigmies huddled together for protection in the world of giants, were it not for the way the whalers turned up their noses at the glittering pinnacles of glass and painted steel that surrounded them. This air of self-assurance if not impudence seemed to me most marked in the *Kurt Hansen*, perhaps because after three seasons in her my senses were not free of bias.

For me the extraordinary thing about those remarkable little ships was that ultimately no two of them were alike. Built by the same people in the same yard to the same design, they were technically not just sister ships but twelve identical pairs of identical twins whose nurses, at sea, could never tell them apart without referring to the names inscribed on their sterns. Yet for us who sailed in them, there was always something, an oddity of mast, cat's-cradle of rigging, set of wheel house, mounting of harpoon gun, grip on water, or just subtle departure in general line which distinguished one ship from the others.

These differences, of course, manifested themselves also in their behaviour at sea, and I never ceased to marvel how members of the same united brood could differ so much in their performance. One would excel at pert answers to her helm, another rejoice in the roughest of storms, another make light of towing the heaviest of catches, and yet another out-distance all in the vital matter of sprinting from the drifting position with her engines stopped to full speed ahead where a vanished whale had suddenly re-appeared in an unpredicted quarter of the ocean. Or, to return to the ship which mattered most to me, to combine so many refinements of these qualities as to become the greatest all-rounder in the fleet.

I know there are people who, lacking direct experience of these ships, try to explain away these differences as

consequences not of the individuality of ships themselves but of variations in the capacity of the crews who man them and, above all, the quality of the Captains who command them. Of course, no one could have served in these ships for long, particularly not in the *Kurt Hansen*, without appreciating the very great importance of the human element in these matters, but in the end the skill and devotion of sailors only mitigated and did not abolish the influence of the difficulties of which I have spoken. I sensed that there was only one element that could over-ride even the most formidable combinations of these differences, technical skills and human qualities, and that was the infinitely mysterious matter of luck.

Before I joined the *Kurt Hansen* for the first time as a boy of fourteen on long vacation from school up-country, I had never given this question of luck a thought. Since then we had rarely returned to land a catch at the slipway for the factory on shore without my respect for this awesome phenomenon being greatly enhanced. Indeed, it would have comforted my imagination even in those comparatively care-free days of my boyhood if I could have discovered some law which was in charge of the workings of luck in life and circumstance on earth, some calculation why, for instance, one ship and set of men should have so much of it, and others so little. It would have helped if I could have believed fully that luck could be earned and that we all, ships, men and stars, got the luck we deserved. But I soon discovered that this was only partially true and that, however wise it was to do all one could to draw luck one's own way, fortune was no mere extension of a system of human ethics, however exalted, nor just an instrument of some discernible principle of promoting life by injecting incentive of good and deterrents of bad into its processes. Where it appeared one day to coincide completely with the deserts of the recipients, the very next day it would shower

good fortune on others who one would have thought utterly unworthy of such bounty.

We had, for example, one ship in our fleet which had been notoriously unlucky ever since the day of her launching fifteen years before. I am deliberately not mentioning her by name because of the belief held by all members of the *Kurt Hansen*'s crew that to do so would bring down on ourselves some of the unfortunate ship's capacity for mis-timing and mishap. I know that this will be dismissed as ridiculous superstition by most people on shore, where life in its metropolitan context wears such a plausible air of logic and security that they overlook what a fundamentally brief, brittle and insecure business it is, rather as persons who, shutting out the night by drawing the curtains and lighting a lamp in their locked rooms, no longer remember how great is the darkness and how remote the pin-prick of stars outside. But those of us who encounter life beyond the fortifications of towns and civilization, who still climb mountains and experience their fall of cliff and avalanche, who till the land and endure the inconstancies of rain and harvest or sail the seas to hunt for whales, enter an uncircumscribed area of existence where all our brightest knowledge and deepest experience often fail and what is despised as foolish superstition becomes the best available answer to the onslaught of the great unknown in the mind and life of man.

Certainly the most successful whalers I had met in my short time at sea were those who combined a regard for efficiency and the disciplines of their calling with an almost religious observation of the rules prescribed by superstitions born long before their own day. Even my own Captain, who tended to be an exception in this regard and whose crew despite his great success and undoubted skill were worried by a suspicion of flippancy, if not cynicism, in his attitude towards their own deeply entrenched superstitiousness, would never let the name of this particular unlucky ship

pass his lips. When he was forced to do so, I noticed that he never failed to spit after its utterance with the same lack of inhibition and no doubt the same instinctive purpose as the Amangtakwena, the Bantu people among whom we lived up-country who, whenever they caught the stink of a dead animal rotting on the veld, spat vigorously, convinced that thereby they ejected the spirit of evil which death symbolized and which had just tried to enter their person through their nostrils.

Now this unmentionable and unfortunate ship in the fleet could never do anything right. Some of the best crews and Captains had been assigned to her and had all been defeated in their turn, not one particular combination of men serving more than a couple of seasons in her. The representative of the owners, who lived in great luxury in a large house on the fashionable heights overlooking the city and bay of Port Natal and whom one would have thought safely padded against the pricks of superstition, had been so wounded by the ship's continued misfortune that he had already sanctioned three changes of her name because some of his more experienced skippers held that he might alter her luck thereby. Luck, however, is nothing if not a seaman too, and needed no names to tell one ship from the others. For reasons strictly its own, it went on resolutely avoiding the wretched little ship. All in all, everything that was technically and humanly possible was tried to obtain better terms from fate for her, but up to this moment without marked effect.

I do not know whether they relished it, but in their plight, the ship and her changing crews should have had one great consolation: they were exceedingly popular in the fleet. One reason, of course, was that everybody felt free to be sorry for them and all the better in themselves for indulging their sense of commiseration. Another was that no one could possibly envy them as they envied the *Kurt Hansen.*

Just as the seasons behind me had been my kindergarten in the education of luck, so they were primary lessons for me in the radio-active fall-out of envy in the condition of men and their relationships. Our sister whalers may not have actually hated us, but there was not one among them, I am certain, who did not long for the *Kurt Hansen* to be reduced to their ranks with the same ration of success as they themselves received from the fates. It was as if in this regard they looked on luck as some kind of black marketeer of providence, and the *Kurt Hansen* its favourite spiv; whereas they valued our unfortunate sister ship as a kind of lightning conductor which would prevent the cumulative electricity of misfortune from being discharged through any single one of them. While this ship was there with them and continued to be so unlucky, they somehow assumed their own misfortune could never be too great.

And so I could go on multiplying examples, but I think this is enough to suggest how complex and pervasive this influence was in our minds and life at sea. I myself found some comfort in one thing only; a growing suspicion that luck, however much appearances were against it, was not capricious. I had a feeling that if we knew all now, in the beginning as at the end, we might see it woven into a surpassing pattern, an unbroken thread of such a multi-coloured brightness that we would find it difficult to forgive the limitations and blur of perishable senses which seemed to us so final and authoritative. I wondered more and more whether there could not be some vital link between good and bad luck. Perhaps the only thing to do was to trust one’s bad as much as one’s good fortune. Could not what seemed to be so inexplicably bad today turn out years later to have been a stroke of good fortune and both be part of a meaningful whole amounting to something which was greater even than the sum of their parts?

In fact I found it of help to admonish my own impatient thinking by adapting a famous New Testament observation

and contemplating the probability that the children of this world might well be luckier in their own generation than the children of the light. Perhaps this is what we all unconsciously implied when we said that so and so or such and such were “lucky devils”. Who, after all, had ever spoken of “lucky angels”? The matter, I felt, could not be disposed of on all levels until one had faced also the awful question: “Who was the more fortunate, Barabbas or Christ?”

Now I have discussed all these differences and particularly this matter of luck at such length because suddenly they were very much on my mind that Saturday evening. I had no sooner done with the water policeman on duty at the gates to the docks and picked out the *Kurt Hansen* than these considerations assailed me.

All these differences between our whalers that I have mentioned were somehow expressed in the paintwork of each ship. It was as if the experience of each, though vanished behind them, had left fingerprints in the varying patches of paint applied to repair the damage which sea, weather and time had inflicted on them. At least so it had always struck me until this particular evening when, for no known reason, at my first glimpse of them in the last light of the sun, I seemed to be looking not at sets of fingerprints but into the hand of providence itself. Proud, perhaps self-assured even to the point of arrogance so tempting to the small, as the *Kurt Hansen* lay there, my delight at seeing her again was spoilt by an involuntary apprehension, and the valedictory light of the dying winter’s day seemed to enfold her like a mantle of fate. My uneasiness was increased when next I hailed her and got no answer.

I quickly boarded her, opened the door at the head of the companion-way leading down into the forecastle where someone on duty was most likely to be, called out loudly “Anyone aboard?” but got no reply.

I tried the door to the saloon next with the same result. This was so unusual, even for ships as notoriously informal as whalers, that the more I thought on it, the more uncomfortable I became. We may never have considered it necessary to go to the lengths of the great ships all around us who set continuous watches night and day on their gangways but, as far as I knew, it had always been a rule to have at least one man always on duty in ships lying alongside the quay as was the *Kurt Hansen.* However, telling myself not to be too fanciful and that a perfectly simple explanation for it all soon would be available, I took my gear down into the saloon.

The air in this small triangular compartment was heavy with the smell of the cigarillos the Captain incessantly smoked. He anyway could not have been gone long. In fact a glass, which I was certain had been emptied not long before, of a good measure of schnapps still stood by his place at the head of the small table as if he had left in too great a hurry to put it away. Wide open beside the glass lay the ship's big black Norwegian Bible. This was even more astonishing.

The Captain, although a man of deep feelings, was not an overtly religious person. In fact on Sunday, when most of his colleagues and their crews were attending evening service at the small Norwegian church close by the harbour gates, he preferred to call on the owner's representative where after a day of tennis there was always a lively assembly of people and a great deal to drink. Now not one of the least of odd things about it all was that the Bible was open at the 38th chapter of the Book of Job. Since Job is perhaps the greatest text-book available to any student of luck, I need not stress how the sight of it stimulated the mood I had brought on board with me.

I noticed that the Captain had underlined the sixteenth and seventeenth verses, but as I read no Norwegian it was not until I looked it up in the Authorized Version a week later

that I got its drift. I found then it consisted of some of those terrible rhetorical questions that answer themselves only too convincingly and which the Almighty seemed to have used deliberately to increase the temptations of doubt and the feelings of helplessness in the heart of his good and faithful servant Job sitting there on his ash-heap already stricken so unfairly by any earthly measure of justice. “Hast thou entered into the springs of the sea?” Jehovah had thundered at Job, as if the answer were not self-evident. “Or hast thou walked in search of the depth? Have the gates of death been opened unto thee? Or hast thou seen the doors of the shadow of death?”

What on land or sea could have set the Captain reading Job all of a sudden? And why mark these particular lines which, considering the moment of the occasion, were so uncalled for in character? I turned over the pages and found the first sentence of the first verse of the 31st chapter similarly underlined. My immediate thought was that the Captain’s reading had been as extensive as it had been out of character. Then I had no means of telling that it was this sentence which had fired his interest and made him probe backwards into this disturbing book. It was, of course, the famous question: “Canst thou draw out Leviathan with an hook?” I was not surprised to learn later that he had answered both the book and the man of whose visit there was at this time no sign with a triumphant: “A thousand times, yes,” since by nature our Captain specialized in answers rather than questions.

I know that there are great scholars today who translate the original Aramaic word in this sentence not as “Leviathan” but as “crocodile”. I do not think, however, that this is of any importance at all because all of us concerned in this story took “Leviathan” to stand for whale and “hook” for harpoon, and this fact, combined with its numerous references and profound feeling for the sea, drew me, for one, closer to that enigmatic Book.

As for myself at that moment my own questions had no answers but there did occur to me suddenly several remarks I had constantly overheard in the fleet which may have had some submerged connection with the matter since they occurred unbidden to me. "*That* Larsen's a lucky devil, he *sure* is." Or another as common, but perhaps more disturbing was: "Larsen pushes his luck very hard and one of these days he is going to push it too far." And yet another uttered by the oldest skipper in the fleet at a farewell party given to him on his retirement by the owner's representative: "I have learnt not to call any sailor lucky until the end of his days at sea. Larsen has had three lucky seasons, the third luckiest of all. And third time lucky, we say. But I would not assume he can do it again. If he does . . ." The old sailor had shrugged his shoulders.

Finally, there was the remark that perhaps weighed most with me and was often reiterated by the ship's cook. He was an experienced sailor and had also all the instincts of a philosopher. He knew the seas from the black lava cliffs of Iceland to the white Antarctic fringe of the South Atlantic, and was perhaps the severest critic of the Captain. I had heard him say over and over again: "We take our luck in this ship too much for granted and no good will come of it in the end." And by "this ship" we knew, of course, that this proved and faithful servant of the sea really meant the Captain. Was not the fact that the ship had been left unguarded some evidence of the truth of the cook's observation?

I stood there with all this going through my mind, while my eyes looked over the tiny saloon, the tablecloth of a faded yellow plush with its fringe of tassels like mimosa blossom; the covers on the two built-in benches; the curtains which served as a door over the entrance to the Captain's cabin; and the small glass case, suspended in mid-air on brackets in the corner, which held the ship's manuals, Lloyd's register of shipping, pilot books and three

fat manuals bound in brown morocco that looked like family portrait albums but were Larsen's "game books", since they contained the entries made in his sprawling hand, of all his catches, their time, place, duration of struggle at the end of the harpoon, their tonnage and finally the bonus paid on them by the owners to his ships. I might have been standing in a respectable Victorian deep-sea fisherman's parlour, and not the saloon of a modern whaler. Everything was as I had seen it last a year before, except for some things slightly out of position, like the dirty glass on the table, the open Bible, and above it the dark gap it had left in the line of erect books on the shelf, as conspicuous as the space in a line of Guardsmen made by a soldier fallen out in a faint with the heat and stress of a Royal parade.

Were these inanimate things out of position signs that the *Kurt Hansen* had moved out of orbit, too? At seventeen, as I then was, a year feels far longer than it does at three score years and ten, and this year now became so crowded with possibilities that my imagination could readily conceive it long enough to have affected a radical alteration in any scheme of things. Life, after all, is nothing if not movement and change without cease, and it was change and movement that then seemed to give tongue in the long cello sound drawn from the *Kurt Hansen*'s mooring-ropes by the rise and fall of a sea which is never quite still, not even in so locked and so great a harbour. Also, whenever a lift of water more powerful than the rest gripped the little ship there was a squeak that came from the metal deep within her like that of a mouse suddenly gathered between the paws of a cat. I was half-inclined to climb back up the steep companion-way on deck in order to draw reassurance from the orderly and calm week-end scene outside in Port Natal. But the feeling seemed so irrelevant that I dismissed it.

I went through the plush curtains into the Captain's cabin. There were two bunks in it, and quickly I stowed my gear in the mahogany drawers underneath the one which had been

allotted to me three years before. This unusual privilege was originally conferred on me because I was not a regular member of the crew. This ship, like all the rest, was manned largely by Norwegians brought out specially each year from Norway for the short whaling season in South African waters. One of the exceptions to this was our Zulu stoker ’Mlangeni, who had been with the fleet for many years. I was another exception, of course, and to the end remained the only amateur and outsider among them. In the tight establishment laid down for the little ships there was no room for someone exclusively occupied with the task of spotting whales, which was my task. In all the other ships, the deck hands each had their turn of duty in the crow’s nest to perform. The *Kurt Hansen* was the first and may well have been the last to depart from this procedure.

It all came about in a way which is worth recalling if only for the light it throws on our Captain’s character.

CHAPTER TWO

Captain

THREE YEARS BEFORE the opening of this story one of my school friends, Eric Watson, had brought me home with him for our long winter vacation, which coincided almost to a day with the whaling season. He was the son of the local representative of the whaling concern, Andrew Watson, who was also one of its main shareholders. We had hardly settled in for our holiday when at my urging, for I gathered he had done it before and did not like it over much for reasons that will soon be plain, he got permission from his father for us to spend some time with the whaling fleet. His father promised at once to speak to his most trusted captain, a man nearing retirement, the very next time his ship came into port. This experienced sailor, he thought, would be the ideal person to take charge of two high-spirited boys at sea. Yet in the end it was not this worthy man who was destined to take us whaling. On the Sunday evening after our arrival on holiday vacation when my host proposed arranging the matter with him, the captain had been unexpectedly detained in his ship. He arrived at the party too late for the purpose for which he had been invited.

However, Thor Larsen, to give our Captain his full name, was, of course, the first of the special guests to arrive. I say “of course”, because I was to discover that he tended to be the first to arrive as well as the last to leave whether it was

a matter of drinking with the owner’s representative or quitting the whaling grounds because of a mounting gale.

I was still on the tennis court that Sunday when Thor Larsen joined the players sitting out, relaxed in their Madeira chairs on the lawn above, and watching the game.

It was almost as if time had recognized the significance of the occasion for me and used the winter evening to underline the moment. The scene, in fact, presented itself to me rather like some painting by a “primitive”, an African Douanier Rousseau, wherein the detail was minutely charged with aboriginal wonder, and the encompassing vision, despite the apparent sophistication of the matter, was innocent like that of man’s in the Garden before the Fall. The great spathodia trees around the huge house, so mysterious in their immunity to winter, presented a second manifestation of flower like a flicker of pentecostal fire against the bright blue sky.

There was just enough of a shiver in the evening air to set their leaves and petals trembling as if indeed some transcendental spirit were walking their perennial green. Beyond their dark leaves and between their great trunks, I snatched at glimpses of the ample house, first the outline of the old tiled roof with an edge of gold to it from the westering sun and then, since the building faced east, the white of the smooth walls below it, ashen with shadow. As a result, the glass of the windows was secret and without lustre and the wide-open doorway was re-sealed like a Nigerian tomb with the ebony of averted light.

Below the broad terrace right to the edge of the tennis court spread a lawn of Zulu grass in shrill barbaric green, each blade keen as the head of an assegai. There, in the centre of a long crescent of Madeira chairs, their wicker glowing with the sun spilling over the leaves of the trees behind them, stood a long table under a dazzling white cloth covered with crystal bowls, cut-glass tumblers and decanters, all quick with light.

Beside the table stood the tall Zulu butler. When not serving one of the flannelled men in the chairs, he stood massively still as if fixed in one position by a great weight of undeclared spirit within. He wore a long white coat of starched drill that fell to his knees. From one shoulder a wide band of Prussian blue velvet crossed his broad front to be gathered on his hip into a long tassel of gold. The upper part of him looked splendidly ambassadorial, as if the great legendary African kingdom of Monomotapo, which the valiant Portuguese discoverers who had given the land its name had sought for so long in vain, were indeed a reality and he its plenipotentiary. But when one's eyes followed the stiff trousers beneath the coat down to the ankles the impression was cancelled, for the man's broad feet were bare.

This may sound a small thing but the fact remains that it has persistently dogged me all my life, demanding evaluation from my imagination. All I knew as a boy was that where Europeans were in control this was the implacable custom not only in Port Natal but all over Africa. I knew several instances of white employers who had dismissed black domestic servants after years in their employ because they suddenly insisted on wearing shoes; and this was considered an outrage.

Today, perhaps, I can see further. Understandably, we like to think of ourselves as creatures of pure reason. But as I grow older I am struck by the power of something that is beyond reason and conduct and utterly non-rational in nature and intent. It appears that we are all subject to some dark symbolism that imposes on us patterns of behaviour which have to be obeyed. We can reject them in the light of reason and relieve them and ourselves of some of their and our own darkness in the process; but we cannot obliterate them. If they cannot have their way with us squarely and fairly, then they will do so violently and opaquely.

Today, this matter of the butler's bare feet is to me one clear image, among a host of others, of behaviour that we were darkly compelled to follow in Africa without really knowing what we were doing. The bare feet were, perhaps, a mark of the extent to which we exceeded our humanity in Africa and unwittingly assumed the role of gods, for certain forms of worship do demand that men remove their foot-wear before entering the temples. Anyhow, we are only now beginning to encounter, like the first faint ripples of a converging typhoon, the consequences of the equinoxial tensions we have set up both in the Africans and ourselves.

I suppose it is natural to tend to look towards established power, the commanding heights, the far horizons and the stars set in their Galileonian courses, for prescriptions of fate. But I think now that it is in the small and uncared for grains around our feet that the forces of change grow great and terrible.

That evening, I realized with the shock of hindsight that the Zulu butler stood there not only as an image of some fateful contradiction in ourselves, but also as a warning predicting a dangerous decline invisible ahead. At the same time I found his incongruous state of apparel merely rather absurd and endearing. Whenever I had a chance to observe him it merely made me smile to see him standing there thus, looking so seriously over the men sprawled in the yellow chairs, their faces and necks pink with blood-pressure and exertion. And he continued to look with the utmost gravity out over the tennis court and the red roofs of the houses set in colonial fashion, in wide gardens full of native trees, their leaves a dark pagan green, lit here and there only by that quick spathodia flicker of which I have spoken, out over to the aspiring city, its glass glittering with the vivid sunset colour and beyond to the shining harbour and the blue Indian ocean as if at any moment there, on the faultless rim of the graphic winter's evening, would come a ship charged with a cargo of overwhelming import to him.

It was the first time I myself had ever seen the sea and I felt that perhaps just watching it could be a whole-time occupation. There was the great harbour, its open water shining like a speckled old mirror, framed in the archaic gilt of the sun. It was full of ships of all kinds, few of them flying the same flags or painted the same brilliant colours. There was something miraculous about having the ships themselves directly under my eyes to give living fullness to the paintings in museums and illustrations in books that I had seen. A ship which had just crossed the bar at the harbour mouth was swinging round north towards Mozambique. As she completed the movement she lay broadside on to us. Gathering way on her course, the muscular swell of the Indian Ocean, which here is never lean or feeble as it can be in other oceans, gripped her and pushed her slowly far over to her side. She went gracefully to starboard as if willing to be tumbled on her back, then righted herself and, coming back to give her port shoulder a turn too, caught the sun full on the windows of her bridge and wheel-house to flash like a heliograph back to the land. I did not know her name or her destination but the flash was like a signal intended especially for me.

I turned my back on the sea to notice the butler giving me an oddly comradely look, as if he had read my reactions. That did not surprise me. The life that the black people of Africa led with us, who seldom spoke their language or knew their ways, forced them to rely on their intuitions and sharpened them to an extraordinary degree. Their awareness of what we were as human beings often was more accurate than our own judgements of one another despite our advantages of a common language and easy contacts. Or are these perhaps not advantages after all? Anyway it was not the first time that I had had to go to the rag-and-tatter Africans of my childhood to re-learn the importance of the look in the human eye. I got to know the butler better later but on this Sunday evening, though

slightly astonished by the intensity of his regard, I was strangely pleased when he raised his hand above his shoulder to salute me and followed it up with a smile.

Presently I was on the court myself. My partner and I became hotly engaged; at last the match stood at 12–11 in our favour. The score was match point to our advantage when one of our opponents smashed a short lob from my partner at an acute angle down into my half of the court. Somehow I had anticipated his stroke, got to the ball and, as often happens when I have no time for deliberation, by sheer instinct I sent back a winner, a fast low back-hand stroke driving the ball just out of reach of the man at the net. For a moment it looked as if it were going out but a spurt of white chalk showed that I had just managed to find the far corner of the court.

The watchers in the chairs, who had stopped talking and followed the last two games closely, called out, “Well done, you two, well done!” and then immediately resumed talking and drinking, with the exception of one man, the only one of them not in flannels.

Rather apart, in a chair at the extreme left of the group, he went on clapping, calling out again and again in a loud voice: “Bravo! Bravo!” Indeed he kept it up so long that some of the spectators turned to stare at him.

If the man noticed it, he did not show it. Yet I doubt whether he did. Knowing him as I did afterwards, I do not think it would ever have occurred to him that anybody would regard him as an inferior. Instead of returning their quick sharp regard, he kept his eyes on me even when he stopped applauding.

I had to walk close by his chair thereafter in order to reach my own, and as I did not know him and was in any case only a boy, would not have dreamt of speaking to him first. But it was he who stopped me and spoke.

Up to then I had always assumed that Scandinavians, particularly Norwegians, were all tall, fair and blue-eyed.

Thor Larsen, for it was he, was the first of the exceptions I have since encountered. He did not stand, I believe, a fraction more than five foot seven inches in his shoes. He was broad-shouldered, unusually long-bodied, long-armed with a powerful chest, shortish neck and a face oddly Mongolian except that his slightly slanted eyes in the broad head above the high cheek bones and underneath black eyebrows and black hair were an intense and vivid grey. Yet there was nothing grey about the impression he made on me.

He struck me at once as a person strangely dark, like the midnight blue of the sea under a cloudless sky. It was a blackness, moreover, that owed nothing to colour of hair or skin. Thor Larsen's darkness was personal and part perhaps of his national character, for I have come to suspect that even the fairest of Scandinavians contain something of the darkness of their long Arctic winter in their spirit. Ibsen, Strindberg and even the fairy tales of Hans Andersen are charged for me with a frightening element of darkness. What light there is in them is, as it were, that of a sun low on the horizon, a native midnight sun of their spirit. But in Larsen's case it struck me there was a factor of choice—as if he turned to darkness freely as the element in which his self-assured spirit could shine to the greatest advantage.

As I walked past him, one broad hand left the empty glass he had been clasping in both, his long arm darted out and he seized mine in a firm grip.

"You play good, very good, not?" He addressed me in a deep voice, rasping and uninitiated in the subtleties of doubt.

His action was so unsuspected that I was startled by it, blushing at the ardent note of his praise.

Looking briefly into his intense eyes and down on a face that was marked almost as if by smallpox with long exposure to extremes of weather, I said diffidently: "Thanks. We were rather lucky to win."

“Nonsense!” he answered decisively. “You play good; your eye good, very good. Your reflexes quick, not?” Despite the clumsy accent and idiom, the phrases were fired rapidly at me. He paused briefly and then, showing that though English was a foreign language to him his ear was as ready as his tongue, he asked: “You’re not English, not?”

“No,” I said. “My people are Boers. I come from far up-country.”

“Ha! A-ha! A Boer, a young Boer!”

Pronouncing “Boer” as “Bo-herr”, he uttered the word as though it explained everything.

His father, he went on to say at some length, had fought for the Boers in the Boer War with a brigade of Scandinavian volunteers who had come out to help us against Milner’s English, and his father had told him “Bo-herr” shot “damn much better” than anybody in the world.

“You too shoot good, not?” he concluded. “I think so, that’s why you play tennis so good! Not?”

I was unable to admit that I did shoot rather well and that indeed I had quite a reputation as a quick and unusually accurate long-distance shot. I felt so embarrassed to be singled out and discussed so loudly in such a personal manner in front of people I had only just met that I tried to move on.

However, he held on to my arm and commanded: “I want to talk with you. You fetch a chair and you sit here!”

Much as I disliked the prospect, I could not refuse without being rude. I nodded, laid my racket on the grass by his chair and went to find one of my own.

Behind me I heard him shout “Jack!” and I saw the Zulu butler’s monumental pose vanish into immediate action. Obviously knowing the precise import of the shout, he scooped up a tray with a decanter of gin and angustura on it, and carried it with long strides of massive grace to Larsen.

Chair in hand and thirsty myself, I went to wait at the table for the butler's return. He was, as I had noticed since my arrival two days before, much older than he had appeared at a superficial glance. I watched him shake some drops of angustura into Larsen's glass, twirl it expertly round in his fingers and, like a born connoisseur, hold it up against the sunset to see that the bitters were spread evenly all over the glass. In that light his face was aubergine, the stained glass a brilliant transparent pink, and the half tumbler of gin he poured out flashed like melted platinum.

When he returned to the table, as this was the first moment I had had alone with him, I said to him in polite Sindakwena, the language of the Amangtakwena of Umangoni on whose frontiers we lived, "I see you, oh! my father: I see you."

His face glowed with pleasure, and from deep down, more from his stomach than his throat, he exclaimed "Auck! I greet you, 'Nkosan. Little Prince, I greet you."

"They call you Jack here," I went on, warmed by so chivalrous a greeting. "But what do they call you in your father's house?"

Well-intentioned as my host was, I suspected he would not have bothered to enquire after his butler's native name. Personal names among the Zulu are either so long or so difficult for European tongues that it had become a colonial habit to inflict on African servants simple European names like "Jack". My suspicion was confirmed when I noticed what warmth the question brought to the butler's eyes.

"My father has long since left me his kraals," he said, using the same idiom the Amangtakwena did to indicate that his father was dead. "But in my father's house I was called Nkomidhl'ilale."

Smiling to myself at the thought of what my host would have made of such a name, I took to it with relish. It meant literally "A steer that eats and lies down" and was, I knew,

clearly intended to convey that he came of a family of substance and had been born into a state of plenty. I had all along assumed from the way he spoke that among his own people he must be a person of importance, for among them the three main marks of the gentleman were to be well-spoken, as he was, fearless and intelligent. His name set assumption beyond doubt for me.

“Would you, Nkomi-dhl’ilale, please give me a glass of grinadella juice?” I asked.

“Auck!” he exclaimed once more with satisfaction, poured out a tumbler full to over-flowing of the thick green-yellow juice of the purple passion fruit of Africa, put it on a silver salver and handed it to me instead of giving me the glass direct.

“Auck!” he muttered, shaking his head and, putting the salver down, covered his mouth with his hands to laugh into them with happy surprise.

I wish I could convey how much that “Auck!” meant to me. Zulus have a whole range of exclamations which, like “Auck”, are a direct musical abstraction of subtle shades of feeling and say, with one chord, what several sentences could not express.

The “Auck!” still alive in my ears, I was turning to join Thor Larsen when he whispered: “’Nkosan! ’Nkosan!”

“Yes, Nkomi-dhl’ilale,” I responded, standing still and thinking I detected a note of urgency in his voice.

He did not reply at once and appeared to be pondering what to say. Finally he said slowly: “You are going back to the man whose place is on the great water?”

“Yes. Why?” I asked, receiving confirmation of what I had already assumed, namely that Larsen had something to do with whaling.

“He has the thirst of a chief of chiefs,” the Zulu replied. After another pause to let this information bring its effect, he added: “And ’Nkosan, he has the eyes of an ’Nyanga—a witch-doctor.”

His tone now indeed was urgent. Yet I felt he was not warning me so much as drawing my attention to facts of importance that he feared I might miss out of lack of experience. “It would be as well, ’Nkosan,” he concluded, his tone low with the gravity of his exhortation, “not to forget to spit three times on leaving his presence.”

I could not help smiling inwardly at the effect spitting even once would have had on that respectable colonial company. At the same time I was greatly touched that he should feel so protective towards me. Thanking him for his advice, I felt bound to ask: “You do not like the man whose place is on the water?”

“Oh, no, ’Nkosan! It is not that,” he remonstrated. “He is a chief among men, but he is a house visited by strange spirits.”

I would have liked to have gone on talking to him. It was odd how much more at home I felt with him than the rest of the company, but Larsen was clearly getting more and more impatient for my return. The last thing I wanted just then was to be made conspicuous again by him bawling at me. I joined him not a moment too soon.

I had barely reached for my chair before he presented his first question like a pistol at my head.

“What did that black Jack say to you?”

The tone was suspicious, as if he had an inkling we had been discussing him. It was my first intimation of many that he possessed unusually sensitive antennae of spirit to reinforce his considerable powers of observation.

“I was asking him about his name in Zulu and so on.”

“All that time just asking about a name!” The tone now was not suspicious so much as provisional and suspended between a statement and a question.

“It was a long name that needed explanation,” I said.

“And what was this name?” he asked.

I told him, describing in full my interpretation of the meaning of Nkomi-dhl’ilale.