

THE M. K.'S SENIOR TRIP

Based on actual missionary experiences

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Serving in southern Africa under Baptist World Mission since 1992

PURPOSES: The story addresses the role of children in missionary work. “MK s” (missionary kids) are a privileged group, not to be pitied, but envied. This theme is introduced in the first segment and then reinforced throughout the story. The story also attempts to couch what could otherwise be dry tidbits of missionary history, with real-life adventure. The political and missionary histories of southern Africa are complex, interdependent, and fascinating. They clearly demonstrate the timeless warfare between God and Satan and between missionaries and governments. They repeatedly illustrate the triumph of faith over power and plans. Perhaps no geographical area better demonstrates this spiritual conflict than Southern Africa in the nineteenth century.

NOTES:

- The events of this story are true accounts. The order of events and settings are sometimes altered to add fluidity and continuity to the story.
- The setting of the story, i.e., telling the story to college classmates, is fictitious.
- Most of the story is presented in the first person. The designations “(NAR)” and “(1P)” will be used to indicate the changes between narrative and first person sections.
- Many of the names of tribes and places have variant spellings in various books of the nineteenth century. The author has attempted to consistently utilize the most prevalent forms.
- Fictitious names are used for Kevin & Tamara Brosnan, Daniel Brosnan, & David Brosnan. They are Brian & Laura Brennan, Derek (the student), and Joseph (the brother) respectively.

OVERVIEW OF SEGMENTS:

- SEGMENT ONE – Africa is my Home
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SEGMENT ONE – AFRICA IS MY HOME

(NAR) Saturday, the big day, finally arrived. Keith and Laura Brennan said a final, sad “good-bye” and waved as they drove away from campus, leaving their oldest son, Derek, behind.¹ Derek was excited about his new life as a Bible college student, but also a bit apprehensive about his new culture. “What will it be like to live in America?” he thought. Many memories of Africa flooded his mind as he made his way to his dorm room. Similar thoughts occupied Keith’s mind as he pondered what impact his son’s absence would have on their missionary lives and work in southern Africa.

“Hi, my name is Steven and I’m a junior. I guess we’re roommates.” “Yes, I guess so,” answered Derek as he extended his hand. Unconsciously Derek gave Steven the customary African hand shake which involved three separate clasps of the hands. “What’s that?” Steven asked with a puzzled look on his face. “I’m sorry. That’s an African handshake. I guess it might take a while for me to adjust to life here in America.” “So, you grew up in Africa?” “Yes, I’m an MK as they call us, a missionary kid.” “Wow, I can’t imagine what it would be like to grow up in Africa. That must have been really hard for you. I bet you couldn’t wait to come home.” “Actually, America was a place we visited every few years to say ‘hello’ to churches and relatives I hardly knew. Africa is my home and it’s the greatest place in the world to grow up.” “You’re kidding, right? I mean you didn’t have Wal-Mart, did you? Didn’t you miss all the modern conveniences? It must have been so boring.” “No way! You wouldn’t believe all the neat stuff I did in Africa. I grew up doing things other kids only dream about. And, as far as ministry goes, well, I’ve had more opportunities to serve the Lord than most adults in the States.” “So, what were some of the things you did there in Africa?” Steve asked.

(1P) How many kids can say they were the first white boy to ever step foot in some villages in Zambia? Who can say that they drove hundreds of miles through the African bush before they even had a driver’s license?² How many have laid in a tent at night listening to hippos grunt and lions roar? How many have watched a leopard hunt at night? Who has sat in a camp surrounded by a herd of elephants?³ How many have hiked around the magnificent Victoria Falls?⁴ Who can say that they have shared their faith in an open-air village meeting where the only light was the moon light glistening off the ripples of the mighty Zambezi River? How many kids get to play in their church orchestra every week and compose special music for their church? How many kids have crossed the dunes of the Kalahari or rescued thirsty men stranded in the middle of the desert? How many people do you know who have slept in mountainous caves which were once the strongholds of Zulu warriors? Have you ever caught a full-grown hammer-head shark? How many people do you know who had their pilot’s license before their driver’s license?⁵ I actually thought it was pretty neat growing up in Africa.

“Ok, I get the point. That’s awesome. So, what would you say was the neatest thing you ever did in Africa?”

(1P) Well, I guess my dad felt bad that I didn’t have the opportunity to go to a real school so he offered to take me on what he called “a senior trip.” I chose to retrace the explorations of David Livingstone. So, last year, my dad, his name is Keith, Joseph, my brother, and I spent two weeks traveling through the wilds of Africa. It was like a journey back in time, a real safari, full of adventure and the unexpected. Well, I guess it’s time for lunch.

(NAR) “Hey, don’t stop now. I want to hear about your trip,” Stephen requested. “OK, but let’s have lunch first,” Derek replied as the two young men made their way to the dining common. Derek ate with several of Steven’s friends at the dining common. “This is my new roommate, Derek. He’s an MK from Africa,” Steven informed his three friends. “Derek, tell them what you told me about some the neat things you did in Africa,” Steven asked between monstrous bites of his cheeseburger. As the five students began clearing their table, Steven’s three friends decided they would come back to Steven’s room to hear about Derek’s senior trip.

SEGMENT TWO – THE MISSIONARY TRAIL

(NAR) Back at the dorm the four students listened eagerly as Derek told a story unlike any they had ever heard.

(1P) It was a full day's drive from Johannesburg to the Makgadikgadi Pans⁶ of Botswana. Botswana was called Bechuanaland in Livingstone's day, when it was simply known as the land of the great desert, the Kalahari. The desert itself was an extremely hot and desolate waste land inhabited by few, but the occasional bushman. No white person had ever attempted to penetrate its trackless expanse. Yet, what became known as the "missionary trail" skirted the eastern edge of the Kalahari, the same course we followed on the first day of my senior trip.

The "missionary trail" owed its existence to the persecutions of the Boers, the Dutch colonists who favored slavery and vehemently opposed missionary work to the indigenous peoples of southern Africa. Missionaries who traveled the conventional routes to the north were turned around and sent back to Cape Town by the Boers, who had recently settled in the vast, fertile area north of the Vaal River, known as the Transvaal. These pilgrimages were later designated as the "Great Trek" and these pilgrims became known as "Voortrekkers."

The Boers had succeeded in exiling one of Africa's most powerful monarchs, the great Zulu chief, Mosilikatze, who had fled with his people hundreds of miles north into present day Zimbabwe. Few people understand that one of Livingstone's primary motives for northward exploration was his inability to conduct missionary work in the vicinity of the Boers. They had in fact destroyed Livingstone's home and mission station at Kolobeng, some 190 miles north west of present day Johannesburg and situated on the "missionary trail." Thus, the Boers unwittingly became one of the greatest indirect causes of the emancipation and evangelization of the indigenous peoples of Africa.

From Johannesburg we traveled northwest, intersecting the old "missionary trail" just inside Botswana. It was in this vicinity that Livingstone established his first three mission stations: Mabotsa, Chonuane, and Kolobeng. A missionary or explorer coming from Kuruman, the usual starting point, would have already traveled 250 miles northeast through lion-infested wilderness.⁷ Both Robert Moffat (Livingstone's father-in-law) and Mrs. Livingstone suffered hair-raising encounters with lions on that very stretch of road. It was in fact, right there at Mabotsa, where Livingstone was attacked and maimed by a lion in 1843.

A hospital now marks the location of Livingstone's original Kolobeng mission, situated twenty-five miles west of Botswana's capital, Gaborone. It was here in 1841, that Livingstone gained his first Motswana convert, Sechele, chief of the Bakwena tribe. (*Motswana* is the singular of *Botswana*) Before us lay the ruins of Livingstone's home and original church building. We were gripped with a sense of awe that transcended time and made us witnesses of one of the most exciting pages of missionary history. I could see Livingstone's hands placing each brick, the beading sweat on his forehead, and his occasional glance to the north. I could hear his lips whisper, "Who will penetrate through Africa?" (Blaikie, p. 99)

Livingstone's first journey into the Kalahari commenced from this very spot in 1849. In contemplation of that journey he wrote,

Such was the desert which we were now preparing to cross – a region formerly of terror to the Bechuanas from the numbers of serpents which infested it and fed on the different kinds of mice, and from the intense thirst which these people often endured when their water-vessels were insufficient for the distances to be traveled over before reaching the wells. (*Travels and Researches*, p. 61)

Even an enemy native warned, “Where are you going? You will be killed by the sun⁸ and thirst, and then all the white men will blame me for not saving you.” (*Travels and Researches*, p. 67)

Two-hundred and eighty-five miles of arid wilderness stretches northward between Kolobeng and Chapman’s Baobab, the next significant landmark in this scrub country, and our first night’s destination. This huge tree is situated on the northern extremity of the Makgadikgadi Pans. Chapman’s Baobab⁹ is believed to be the oldest and largest tree in Africa, perhaps over 4,000 years old. It served as an early point of rendezvous for missionaries and explorers in an otherwise featureless country. The circumference of the trunk is eighty-one feet! This massive edifice is all the more impressive against the almost barren landscape. This tree also served as a post office box. Travelers would leave letters lodged between its seven mighty boughs. These letters generally found their way to England in about nine months .

After days of plodding through the dry sands Livingstone caught sight of the Makgadikgadi Pans.¹⁰ He shouted for joy at the sight of the vast lake stretching beyond the horizon, believing he had finally discovered the long-sought Lake Ngami. It was however, only a salt pan mirage. The ancient lake bed was dry. The undiscovered Lake Ngami still lay 190 miles to the west. Livingstone continued due west and discovered Lake Ngami on August 1, 1849. It wasn’t until his third trip through Botswana in 1852, that he actually continued north across the Makgadikgadi pans in his quest to reach Linyanti, and the abode of the great chief Sebituane. Of the Makgadikgadi Pans he wrote,

Ntwetwe is fifteen miles broad and one hundred long. The latitude might have been taken on its horizon as well as upon the sea. ... It was, without exception, the most uninviting prospect I ever beheld” (*Travels and Researches*, p. 91, 93).

Livingstone further observed,

About two miles beyond the northern bank of the pan we unyoked under a fine specimen of the baobab,¹¹ here called, in the language of Bechuanas, Mowana; it consisted of six branches united into one trunk. At three feet from the ground it was eighty-five feet in circumference. (*Travels and Researches*, p. 180)

It was at this point that Livingstone’s guide forsook him to his own fate. It was five days before he found water, which he called on that day, “that fluid of which we had never before felt the true value.” (*Travels and Researches*, p. 93)

My dad, brother, and I felt as if we were walking on the moon. There is no other place on earth like the Makgadikgadi Pans. We easily spotted Chapman’s Baobab. I could well imagine Livingstone resting in the very spot where I now stood, and being as awed as myself at this massive tree on the edge of these barren pans. The pans are an absolutely flat, featureless, ancient lake bed¹². In vain one searches from horizon to horizon to find a single blade of grass or clump of dirt to interrupt the monotonous uniformity of the flat, grey surface. There are no roads, just maps and GPS coordinates. In this wonderfully bizarre

place I spent the first night of my senior trip and it was one of the few nights that we were not visited by beasts of prey.

(NAR) Derek took a break from his story to attend an orientation meeting for all freshmen at 2:00.

SEGMENT THREE – STALKED BY A LEOPARD

(NAR) When Derek returned to his room at 3:00, he was surprised to find a group of ten fellow students waiting to hear more about his senior trip. “We already told them the first part, so you can continue right where you left off,” Steven explained.

(1P) We spent the early part of our second day exploring the pans both on foot and in the Land Rover.¹³ We took one last look at the mighty baobab which once provided shade to Livingstone. This day was Joseph’s first opportunity to drive the Land Rover. As I remember it, my dad spent most of the day in the back seat while Joseph and I alternated driving. We both felt an incredibly wonderful sense of freedom, although, looking back, I can now discern that my dad suppressed less majestic apprehensions. We saw some ostriches and followed a black-backed jackal.¹⁴ It was July, which is winter-time, so the pans were dry and wildlife was scarce. While there is an abundance of wildlife around the pans during the summer, the sun is unbearable at that time of year as it radiates off the pan at over 110 degrees and shade is hard to come by.

Our destination that second day was Maun, on the southeastern edge of the great Okavango Delta, the only inland water delta in the world. It is here that the Okavango River from Angola dissipates into a vast, shallow swamp comprising 4,000 square miles of unspoiled African beauty, teeming with vast herds of African wildlife. This is the only inland area of permanent water in all of Botswana, a country slightly larger than France. The delta terminates at Maun, which is situated sixty-two miles northeast of Lake Ngami, which was discovered by Livingstone in 1849. The lake has since dried up and seldom contains any water. An amazing ninety-five percent of the delta’s water evaporates under the scorching sun before reaching Maun. In fact, the evaporation rate exceeds the rainfall throughout most of Botswana.

Livingstone passed through this area in 1849. It was not the existence, but the location and accessibility to Lake Ngami, which had shrouded it in mystery for so many years. He viewed the lake as a stepping-stone across the great desert. His motive was not discovery, but to reach the powerful chief Sebituane of the Mokololos, who ruled over a great kingdom north of the Kalahari. The discovery of Lake Ngami convinced Livingstone that the northern interior of Africa was not a vast, uninhabited desert, but rather a well-watered, lush, and richly populated mission field. How providential that chief Sechele, Livingstone’s convert at Kolobeng, was well acquainted with Sebituane and his kingdom. In fact, Sebituane had once saved Sechele’s life. Without Sechele’s assistance Livingstone would doubtless have perished in the desert.

Leaving the pans behind, we traveled north toward Botswana’s main east-west tarred road. The scenery, although monotonous, had a certain African beauty to it. It was a sandy, scrub country with many thorny bushes and small trees. It was here that we had our first tire puncture.¹⁵ It wasn’t hard to find the spot where the long thorn punctured the front, right tire. Joseph and I explored a bit while my dad repaired the tire. We soon discovered a buffalo skeleton.¹⁶ The prints in the sand indicated we were standing at the spot of a recent lions’ feast. Not long afterward we arrived at a small village, an indication that we were close to the road. We intersected the road at Gweta. Livingstone spent an entire Sunday with the head man of Gweta in 1853, which he called Maila.¹⁷ He comments that he measured the water temperature in the ponds at 100

degrees. (*Travels and Researches*, pp. 184-185) We only passed through on our way to Maun.

We made much better time on the tar road, but Maun seemed just beyond our reach. My father suggested we find a place to make camp before dark. We drove just far enough north of the tar road as to be concealed from any passing vehicles. We enjoyed a hot meal and went to bed. We talked much of the experiences of the past two days before drifting off to sleep in our little, blue tent.

Later that night my father was startled out of his sleep by a low-pitched, breathing sound. He immediately recognized it as a leopard. It was only a few yards from the tent. His first reaction was to find his pocket knife which he kept with him in his sleeping bag. He extended the blade and sat up in the center of the tent. We had not been foolish enough to keep any food in the tent so he knew there was only one reason for the leopard to tear through the tent – us! His fears heightened as he heard the beast circling the tent. Nothing but a sheet of nylon separated us from one of the few animals known to hunt people for prey. He debated whether or not to wake Joseph and me. My dad began shaking each of us. “Wake up,” he whispered. “There is a leopard outside our tent.” I could never adequately describe the sensation of that moment. Was I still asleep? Was this a dream? The three of us sat in near absolute darkness, detecting the leopard’s movements only by the unnerving sound of his breathing. How long will he circle us? Will he attack us on scent alone or will his inability to see us serve as a sufficient barrier to his preying instincts? We will never forget what happened next and I’m sure it is an experience never to be repeated in our lifetimes.

(NAR) “Soccer in ten minutes,” was the loud announcement that came thundering down the halls of the dormitory. “Hey, Derek, you obviously didn’t get killed, but would you mind finishing the story when we get back from the game?” the group of student’s requested. “I suppose so,” Derek answered, as the group headed out to the field.

SEGMENT FOUR – STANDOFF WITH A HYENA

(NAR) As Derek and Steven walked back to their dormitory, Steven commentated on the soccer game,

Wow, that sure was a close game. I thought the junior class had it sowed up until the senior squad scored that equalizer in the eightieth minute. I guess you never really know the outcome until the final whistle. Hey, speaking of the end of the game, I can't wait to hear the end of your story. What happened with that leopard?

Derek & Steven were greeted by most of the students on their floor when they reached the top of the staircase. Someone had been talking. They all wanted to hear the rest of Derek's story. Derek couldn't believe how many new friends he had made during his first day on campus.

(1P) Well, as I mentioned, this leopard kept circling our tent. Then, it became eerily quiet. My dad later told us that he didn't know whether to keep bone silent or scream at the top of his lungs. It didn't really matter because the leopard didn't give him time to make a decision. Moments later we heard the death scream of an antelope about forty yards away. We can only guess that the leopard was using our tent as cover while he stalked the antelope or, like Isaac and the ram, God provided a substitute at the last moment.

Maun was the only supply point for a thousand square miles so we topped up our water and fuel supply before proceeding north through a country which twice prevented Livingstone from reaching the great chief, Sebituane. Fever, the tsetse fly, a hostile tribe, and the terrain together posed an insurmountable barrier to the intrepid missionary in 1849 and 1850. The soil was still comprised of deep, loose, Kalahari sand, but the evidence of water abounded. The dry, empty desert was now replaced by a lush, green vegetation, the sounds of birds, and a great variety of wildlife. We chased a few giraffes,¹⁸ observed a couple lions,¹⁹ and passed several herds of elephants²⁰ before arriving at "Third Bridge." This campsite²¹ lies as deep as a four-wheel drive vehicle dare go into the Okavango swamp. Surrounded by water varying in depth from a few inches to a couple feet, this section of marsh is only accessible by the bridge which is visited nightly by a pride of lions.

We made three interesting discoveries while setting up camp. First, we observed that the baboons have learned how to unzip tents.²² Next, we were entertained by a large specimen of monitor lizard, several feet in length. Finally, we took note of a potential killer in the tree above us, not an animal, but the fruit of the sausage tree. One of these "sausages" fell to the ground with a mighty thud. We were quite surprised at its weight and realized that a direct hit could prove deadly.

We enjoyed a wonderful evening meal amid the sights and sounds of real Africa. After supper my dad consented to take us for an evening, game-viewing drive. We took the road leading away from the bridge and deeper into the marsh. We hoped to come across some lions on the prowl and were not disappointed.²³ After dark we spotted numerous nocturnal creatures and our spotlight illuminated a distinctive set of eyes. We followed three lions along the road and it did occur to us that they were heading toward the same destination as ourselves, our "Third Bridge" camp. We left the lions behind and were all

very weary by the time we returned to our camp. We were anxious to go to bed. It had been a full and memorable day and we all fell asleep instantly.

“Haste makes waste” is an especially important motto in the African bush where small oversights such as miscalculating fuel, setting up camp on a hippo trail, leaving a shoe outside, failing to tighten a lid, walking barefoot, or sleeping with food in the tent can have devastating consequences. In our haste to conclude the day’s activities we made one of those potentially fatal mistakes. I remember that my father later lamented his stupidity and carelessness, but it seemed to me a perfectly understandable human error. He commented that there is no room for such mistakes in the African bush, not even once.

We had left our huge cooler outside next to the tent instead of securing it in the Land Rover. This not only lured dangerous predators to our tent, but also put our food supply in jeopardy. My dad had learned to sleep lightly in the bush and once again it was he who awoke to the commotion outside our tent. Looking through the little window netting, it appeared to him in the darkness as if the cooler’s two wheels were self-propelled. “There goes ten days food supply into the bush,” he thought. Grabbing his flashlight and waking Joseph and me, he darted out the door and into the darkness to reclaim the cooler from what he assumed was a baboon.

“Is he out of his mind,” I thought. “Is this the same man who repeatedly warned us about the dangers of the African night?” “Hurry, Joseph, we must save dad,” I barked at my younger brother. I was uneasy with the sight which confronted me outside the tent. There stood my dad, some thirty yards off into the darkness, wielding nothing but a little pen light. I, on the other hand, carried a flashlight as long as an arm and a knife of similar proportions. “Why is he standing still?” I thought. “Where is the cooler?” And, more importantly to me, “where is the beast that dragged it off?” Sensing imminent danger, I rushed up to my father. He said nothing, but pointed toward a clump of bushes a few yards away, where we could barely make out the form of the cooler. He motioned for me to scan the area with my spotlight. There, in the same clump of bushes, were two menacing eyes reflecting back at us. This was no baboon and it definitely didn’t want to give up the cooler.

(NAR) Just then the phone rang. No, not in the African bush, but in Derek’s dorm room. It was his parents phoning to see how his first day of college was going. “Hey, guys, I’ll be back in a minute. It’s my parents,” Derek explained. “So, what are you doing?” Keith asked his son. “I’m just telling the guys the story of my senior trip in Africa.” “I hope you’re not telling them everything,” Keith replied.

SEGMENT FIVE – WALKING AMONG ELEPHANTS

(NAR) Derek returned to the hall a few minutes later, and noticed that a few unfamiliar faces had joined the group of students who were waiting with bated breath to find out what happened to Derek, Joseph, and their father on that fateful night in the Okavango swamp. Derek resumed his commentary,

(1P) Stating the obvious, I nervously whispered, “Dad, it’s a hyena!”²⁴ My father had only one thought, “how do we safely extricate ourselves from this situation?” “Keep the light in his eyes. Don’t move. Don’t speak,” my dad ordered. After what was probably much shorter than it seemed, the hyena began looking from side to side and then darted off into the darkness, not to be seen nor heard again. The three of us recovered the cooler and all its contents. My dad’s precaution of keeping a strap around the cooler had prevented the hyena from opening it.

We knew of the impressive size and strength of a hyena’s jaws and teeth, but now we had a souvenir and testament to that fact.²⁵ This hyena had sunk his teeth deep into one corner of the cooler and pulled it into the bush. “That’s one, big, powerful mouth!” my dad remarked.

My father later attributed his irrational boldness to two factors. First, and primarily, he was jolted out of sleep and forced into immediate action, which turned out to be a rash impulse rather than a rational decision. Secondly, he just couldn’t countenance the loss of all that food. After all, as he sometimes reminded us, it was purchased with money from the sacrificial giving of God’s people in America. For some reason he was convinced in his own mind that the culprit was a baboon. While baboons can be very dangerous animals, they don’t compare to the viciousness and power of hyenas, which sometimes even attack lions.

We spent several fabulous days in this area. It seemed that every turn of the road revealed some wonderful African experience. My dad had a knack for never bogging down. I think he just had an innate sense for just what the Land Rover could negotiate. I, on the other hand, thought we had wings until I buried us in the swamp one afternoon.²⁶ What seemed to me our final resting place was only an hour’s delay to my dad, who instructed Joseph and me in the use of the shovel, tire boards, and the high lift jack.

Leaving the Okavango, we set our course toward Linyanti, the nineteenth century capital of the Makololo kingdom and seat of Sebituane’s reign. Linyanti sits on the southern edge of another vast swamp which feeds into the Linyanti and Chobe Rivers, both tributaries to the great Zambezi River, which Livingstone discovered in June, 1851. The sixty-five mile journey took us most of the day. But, unlike some trips, just getting there was half the fun. We frequently hit quarter mile stretches of deep, loose sand.²⁷ The challenge was to downshift before the vehicle came to a stop. It seemed the Land Rover could go through anything as long as we kept the “revs” high and didn’t stop. My dad trusted no one but himself to get us going again when we did bog down in the deep sand, for a mistake at that point would mean a couple hours of digging in the hot sun. I hated it when he took the wheel because he also enjoyed driving and it was usually another hour before he would let me drive again.

There is no place in Africa just like Linyanti. It is pristine Africa at its glorious best. My father described his previous visit to this place as “terrifying.” He spent his first night expecting to be devoured at any moment. But, no one can improve upon Livingstone’s description. He wrote,

We were close to the reeds, and could listen to the strange sounds which are often heard there. ...and we heard human-like voices and unearthly sounds, with splash, guggle, jupp, as if rare fun were going on in their uncouth haunts. At one time something came near us, making a splashing like that of a canoe or hippopotamus; thinking it to be the Makololo, we got up, listened, and shouted; then discharged a gun several times; but the noise continued without intermission for an hour. (*Travels & Researches*, p. 194)

So inaccessible was this area that the Makololo viewed Livingstone’s arrival like a visit from the gods. He again writes,

The villagers looked as we may suppose people do who see a ghost, and in their figurative way of speaking said, “He has dropped among us from the clouds, yet came riding on the back of a hippopotamus! We Makololo thought no one could cross the Chobe without our knowledge, but here he drops among us like a bird.” (*Travels & Researches*, p. 195)

Had Sebituane not died suddenly, Livingstone would have received from him what the Boers had refused, freedom to conduct unfettered missionary work in a vast area containing a large population of indigenous people.

The loud grunts of the many hippopotami playing in the river serenaded us to sleep that night.²⁸ Although we didn’t have opportunity to go further north to Sesheke, Zambia, Linyanti is only thirty miles south of that spot where Livingstone discovered the mighty Zambezi River in June, 1851. It is the same spot where, on an previous trip, my father accidentally crossed the bridge without passing through immigration and customs. Thankfully, he recognized his mistake when he reached the northern bank of the Zambezi and was already returning when the police met him half-way across the bridge over the Zambezi River. At Sesheke in 1851, Livingstone didn’t realize he was only sixty miles upstream from the Victoria Falls, which he eventually discovered four years later on November 17, 1855.

We spent the next day exploring Linyanti by foot. There were hundreds of elephants in our vicinity. In fact, our camp was literally surrounded by elephants.²⁹ We could constantly hear them and there were probably five or six within fifty yards of our campsite at any given time. We watched them play in the water as we ate our meals. We enjoyed following them from a safe distance one afternoon as we explored the Linyanti River by foot. They were of course, aware of our presence. Like humans, elephants have their “personal space” which seems to be about thirty yards, more if young are present. Encroaching into that area will provoke a feigned charge with ears extended.³⁰ Failure to heed that warning can result in a genuine charge from which there is generally no escape. Elephants leave little trace of their victims, casting them into the air with their mighty trunks, impaling them with their tusks, and finally pulverizing them with their huge feet and massive weight.

In this setting one needs a keen awareness of his surroundings, which can be limited by hills or heavy vegetation. One little hill gave us such a rush of adrenaline that we decided to return to camp. We were walking along the edge of a bend in the river where this small hill

obstructed our forward view. Suddenly, we heard a crashing, moving sound coming from just over the crest. Clearly, a large animal was moving at high speed, presumably straight toward us. We all turned, but had no time to react.

(NAR) Just then one of the students announced, “Hey, guys, the dinning common closes in thirty minutes. Anyone wanting supper better go now.” Being typical college-age men, the dormitory instantaneously vacated.

SEGMENT SIX – LIONS FOR SUPPER

(NAR) That evening the dormitory supervisor asked Derek if he wouldn't mind sharing the rest of his senior-trip story with the whole dormitory. Some of the students on other floors had heard about the story at supper and made the request.

(1P) As I mentioned, my dad, brother, and I were startled by what we assumed was an elephant charge. It was a fearful moment. Livingstone once wrote of an elephant encounter, "We were startled by his coming a little way in the direction in which we were standing, but he did not give us chase. I have had many escapes. We seem immortal till our work is done." (*Blaikie*, p. 129.)

It was not an elephant we had spooked, but a gigantic crocodile,³¹ which had been sunning himself on the bank just over the crest of the hill. We had front row seats as the enormous reptile raced into the river a few yards ahead of us. It was the first croc we had seen and in fact, we had debated whether any were present in this section of the river.

Linyanti seemed the perfect setting for our finest meal. It is difficult to describe the majestic beauty of an African sunset. This night was exceptionally beautiful. The sun was setting over the swamp, silhouetting an elephant which was playing in the water.³² Weary of canned food, my dad suggested we grill the sirloin steak. He had brought along a slab of sirloin the size of a pizza specifically for a special setting such as this. As he prepared the gas grill, he asked Joseph and me to build an especially big fire. We later found out why.

Our mouths were watering at the sumptuous aroma of the sirloin steak, sizzling on the grill.³³ A thick darkness descended upon us on this moonless night. Those accustomed only to the city are unfamiliar with the true darkness of night. The stars are brilliant. One almost feels he can reach out and grab one. Apart from our camp fire we were enveloped in a blanket of absolute darkness. Looking into the bush was almost like staring at a black wall. Then, the roars began.

Nothing compares to the bone-rattling roars of lions at night. Their roars are so mighty and loud that it sounds as if they are closer than they really are. A lion's roar can in fact be heard for several miles. We listened to the roars of numerous lions that evening. It was easy to identify both the direction and distance of this pride. They were about 200 yards to our right as we faced the swamp. These were anxious moments. I remember my father trying to diffuse the tension with a bit of lighthearted humor. He said, "I didn't let that hyena get our cooler and I'm certainly not going to let these lions take away our sirloin steak." We laughed, but the tension remained. My dad asked us to throw a couple more logs on the fire and ordered us not to move more than a few feet from the flames. His command was unnecessary.

My mind flashed back to Robert's Moffat's account of a night-time encounter with lions. Moffat, often called the "patriarch missionary of South Africa," arrived in Africa in 1817. He wrote,

I had not gone far, when, looking upward to the edge of the small basin, I discerned between me and the sky four animals, whose attention appeared to be directed to me, by the noise I made in breaking a dry stick. On closer inspection, I found that the large, round, hairy-headed visitors were lions; and retreated on my hands and feet towards the other side of the pool. (*Labours & Scenes*, p. 303)

Moffat discovered two more lions adjacent to his wagon. He lost a young cow to the lions, but he survived the terrifying night. I wholly concur with his sentiments when he wrote, "They appeared, as they always do in the dark, twice the usual size. ... We had reason for alarm, lest any of the six lions we saw, fearless of our small fire, might rush in among us." (*Labours & Scenes*, p. 303)

Joseph and I watched as my father prepared to serve the meal. He continued on as if the lions' roars were some recorded music, adding atmosphere to our evening. My father's understanding of animal behavior and sense of safety seemed to rub off on Joseph and me for after a while we became quite comfortable with the idea of being surrounded by lions. David Livingstone wrote that he had no fear of lions during the day or even on a moon-lit night. But, he took great precautions on dark nights and especially during storms. We enjoyed a meal I'll never forget. The sirloin was perfect. The setting was perfect. And, predictably, the lions behaved.

My father was careful to fling every scrap of food as far away from our camp as possible. Unlike the other nights, we added extra logs to the fire before going to bed.³⁴ The only real inconvenience caused by the lions was that none of us were able to visit the imaginary outhouse which is usually situated some distance from our camp. It is one thing to crawl into a tent, knowing that wild beasts may be present. It is quite another sensation to lay on a sleeping bag knowing that a pride of lions is lurking just beyond the darkness. I couldn't believe how quickly my father fell asleep. I remember thinking, "Now, I'm all alone with these lions. What's going to happen when the fire goes out? Shouldn't someone keep watch?" Like my brother and father, after a full day and with a full stomach, I could not long resist the call of sleep.

I awoke to the most frightening, chaotic grunting sounds. I could hear several animals running back and forth around our camp. "Oh no, it's dark," I thought. The fire is out. Our protection is gone. Joseph and my father were sound asleep. I peeped out of our tent's little net window. The early dawn hour provided just enough light to identify the silhouette of the dark shapes. There was the pride! They were animated. They were darting back and forth. Their mouths were open. Before I could wake my dad they tore at the tent. The nylon was no barrier. One pounced on me. I looked up into its jaws. Then I awoke. My heart was racing. It was pitch dark. I looked out the window. There was nothing.

SEGMENT SEVEN – OFF THE MAP

(1P) We woke up the next morning with full stomachs, full bladders, and only a memory of the lions. I remember thinking to myself how very different that spot seemed in the daylight. I took a last glance at Linyanti, a place which had cast its spell upon me, both because of its history and its present charm. This is the very place Livingstone spent two years trying to find. This is the place that gave him hope that the interior of Africa could be opened up to the gospel. This is the spot where I first experienced real Africa with all its ancient splendor and intrigue.

Our proficiency at setting up and taking down camp had improved each day as we became more familiar with the location of all the equipment and the procedures involved.³⁵ I was now fully acclimated to life in the bush and was loving it more every day. I could now understand why my father, with his many responsibilities and pressures in his city ministry, so loved an occasional retreat to the bush. I took one last glance at Linyanti before we set out west on what my dad called an “experiment.”

He proposed setting a course toward the source of the Okavango Delta with the idea of crossing it at its northernmost extremity and then traveling south through Ngamiland, thus circumnavigating the swamp. It was an experiment for several reasons. First, my father had never traveled west of Linyanti. Second, Our map showed no roads or trails in that area.³⁶ It was in fact, just 3,000 square miles of empty space on the map and without detours it appeared to be a distance of about 180 miles. Finally, it necessitated a commitment to reach our destination for we wouldn't have enough fuel to backtrack.

The desert area west of the delta was the bushmen country of the nineteenth century. It is the spot where many early maps placed the scale of miles and other descriptive information because it was otherwise a big, blank, space. It was a dry, hot, unexplored, and largely unpopulated area. The people were known as the Damaras in the north and the Namaquas in the south.

Few snapshots of missionary history afford a greater example of selfless devotion in the face of incredibly difficult circumstances than the largely unknown work of the missionary brothers, Christian and Abraham Albrecht, and Johannes Seidenfaden, who were the first to blaze a trail to the Namaquas in 1805. One historian wrote,

Their journey was an exceedingly trying one, and only men of the truest devotion and the most undaunted courage could have successfully accomplished it. But the Albrechts and Seidenfaden were built in a heroic mould. (Du Plessis, p. 113)

One native sought to dispirit the trio with these words,

You will find in this country plenty of sand and stones, and a thinly scattered population, that always suffers from want of water, and lives under the scorching rays of a cloudless sun on plains and hills roasted like a burnt loaf. (Du Plessis, p. 115)

The following excerpt from their own pen demonstrates the almost insurmountable obstacles these pioneer missionaries faced.

We were not merely separated from our friends, but could get no assistance from any human being. If we had not been able to believe that it was the will of the Lord that we should go to the Great Namaquas, we could not have gone through such fatigue and labour. (Du Plessis, pp. 113-114)

We were never in our lives so perplexed, to think what we should eat or drink, as we have reason to do at present; ... [We] must rejoice when able to get just a drink of water, which is mostly brack or saltish. ... In this place, which is called Bushman-country, there is as little water as there is grass to be found. One must hunger and thirst, and be in continual danger of being devoured by wild beasts, or murdered. (*Labours & Scenes*, p. 57)

Robert Moffat called their work a “bold, self-denying, and dangerous enterprise” which led them to premature graves. (*Labours & Scenes*, p. 54) Abraham Albrecht died from illness in 1810. Christian Albrecht’s wife died in 1812 of illness. Their mission station was attacked by Afrikaner in 1811, the infamous outlaw who later became a trophy of grace. His raid reduced to ashes a work which had impacted hundreds of lives.

We followed the river road as long as possible, enjoying hippos, elephants, herds of impalas,³⁷ crocodiles, zebras, giraffes, cheetah, and other African animals all along the way.³⁸ This seldom-visited area contained some of the largest herds of elephants and antelope we had yet seen. We even came upon a herd of buffalo which slowed our progress for a while.

The bush was thick, making it a bit difficult to find a spot to camp for the evening. My father zigzagged through some brush to find an ideal spot for our evening camp. He had no sooner turned off the engine than an enormous bull elephant, a big tusker, popped out of the bushes directly in front of us.³⁹ We were obviously blocking his path to the river. He stood directly in front of our vehicle looking at us through the wind shield. Even if my father had restarted the engine, he was too hemmed in to make a quick exit. We had no choice but to sit tight. It was another one of those unexpected, unwelcome, unpreventable, memorable moments. Just what is this elephant going to do? He looked as if he was used to getting his own way.

SEGMENT EIGHT – BUSHMEN OF THE KALAHARI

(1P) I will admit that it was a fearful moment. No one ever becomes accustomed to being that close to a wild elephant. We were completely subject to his whims. He turned his head from side to side, extended his ears, and raised his trunk. He seemed a bit obstinate and perturbed at the prospect of taking an alternate route to the river. Clearly, he wanted us to move and we would have all too readily accommodated him if we only could. Slowly, too slowly, he edged his way around the right side of our vehicle. We saw only legs as he passed by our windows. Although not the prettiest part of the animal, we were happy to finally view his posterior through our rear window. After everyone took a collective sigh of relief, we set up camp for the night.

While some of our activities may seem recklessly dangerous, the African bush is in reality a fairly safe place to those accustomed to it, who understand animal behavior and carefully practice basic precautions. For example, it is relatively safe to walk about during the day as we often did. However, my father absolutely forbade us to venture from our campsite at night. I remember questioning his wisdom on this particular evening as I really wanted to take a little evening walk. “But dad,” I said, “I’m sure there are no lions in this area.” He retorted, “There may be lions here and it would be foolish and dangerous to venture beyond the light of our campfire.” To my amazement we passed two lions just a quarter mile down the road when we broke camp the next morning.⁴⁰

We spent the day traveling through what was once a restricted military zone. It had served as a buffer between the South African defense force and the Marxist guerillas of Angola. That afternoon we arrived at the Okavango River. It was with a smug feeling of accomplishment that we ferried across the neck of the great delta, having traveled over 180 miles across unmapped terrain.⁴¹

We topped up our diesel tank and refilled our four, twenty liter fuel containers at a local safari lodge. We also fully restocked our supply of ice, drinking water, and fruit juices. My dad was especially excited about the lodge’s shower facility. And, I will admit that even Joseph and I were anxious to scrub up, after being restricted to a half-pint of water a day for personal hygiene during the last ten days. We were now prepared to trek across the 770 mile expanse of the Kalahari desert toward our final destination, Kuruman, South Africa, the place where Robert Moffat spent half a century among the Bechuanas.

We would bi-sect the largest, uninterrupted expanse of sand in the world.⁴² I could hardly imagine the hardships of the early missionaries trying to cross the deep sands of this inhospitable barrier with ox carts. Our travels would take us through the small, but historical settlements of Ghanzi and Kang. We would intersect the Trans-Kalahari highway just after Ghanzi, so we really only had 290 miles of desolate, dune driving ahead of us.

We camped in the desert that evening⁴³ and then continued west to a place called Drotzky’s Cave or Hyena’s Hole. We spent a good part of the day exploring this cave which was only discovered in the 1930s.⁴⁴ It was exciting to think that I was one of only a few hundred people who have ever seen this cave. From there we visited Xai Xai near the Aha Hills on the border of Namibia. This desolate region is the abode of a bushman

tribe known as the San. Xai Xai was a watering and trading post for the San bushmen. The San people are most known for their clicking language and nomadic lifestyle, subsisting on gathering and hunting.

They were once rumored to live without water in this land where a drop of the precious liquid may be worth more than a bar of gold. In fact, Livingstone relates an account of several unfortunate native Bakwains who happened upon a bushmen encampment in a state of terrible thirst.

...the Bushmen effectually balked a party of his tribe [Bakwains] which lighted on their village in a state of burning thirst. Believing, as he said, that nothing human could subsist without water, they demanded some, but were coolly told by these Bushmen that they had none, and never drank any. Expecting to find them out, they resolved to watch them night and day. They persevered for some days, thinking that at last the water must come forth; but, notwithstanding their watchfulness, kept alive by most tormenting thirst, the Bakwains were compelled to exclaim, "Yak! Yak! These are not men; let us go." Probably the Bushmen had been subsisting on a store hidden under ground, which had eluded the vigilance of their visitors. (*Travels & Researches*, p. 60)

Moffat describes bushmen as being equally insensitive to their own people. It was their custom to abandon a feeble parent with nothing but a day's supply of food and a little water. The parent was left within a circle of stakes to perish under the hot desert sun. Moffat shares the following account of discovering just such an abandoned parent:

On reaching the spot, we beheld an object of heart-rending distress. It was a venerable-looking old woman, a living skeleton, sitting, with her head leaning on her knees. ... "Pray, mother, who are you and how do you come to be in this situation?" to which she replied, "...I have been here four days; my children have left me here to die" "... And, pray why did they leave you?" I inquired. "... I am old, you see, and I am no longer able to serve them; when they kill game, I am too feeble to help in carrying home the flesh; I am not able to gather wood to make fire; and I cannot carry their children on my back, as I used to do." This last sentence was more than I could bear; and though my tongue was cleaving to the roof of my mouth for want of water, this reply opened a fountain of tears. I remarked that I was surprised that she had escaped the lions, which seemed to abound, and to have approached very near the spot where she was. ... she added, "I hear the lions; but there is nothing on me that they would eat; I have no flesh on me for them to scent." (*Labours & Scenes*, p. 98)

While not as astonishing as Moffat's desert discovery, we also came upon a most remarkable scene later the next day. We had traveled a bone straight path for over a hundred miles along the deserted Namibian border when suddenly, two men appeared on the road ahead of us, waving their hands frantically.⁴⁵ "Where in the world did they come from?" were my father's first words. "Do either of you see a vehicle?" my dad added. He later confided that he feared these two men more than our earlier encounters with the elephant, the hyena, and the leopard.

SEGMENT NINE – KURUMAN, LANDMARK OF A CONTINENT

(1P) “Water! Do you have water for us? We are thirsty.” These were the first words of greeting from the two natives. Their facial expressions and gestures added further urgency to their quivering voices. My father reached into the cooler and pulled out two, ice cold, dripping cans of carbonated fruit juice. The men politely declined and again asked, “do you not have water?” “Yes,” was my father’s reply, “but it is warm. Don’t you want something cold to drink?” “Please, give us water,” they answered. No gift of diamonds or fancy toy was ever appreciated more than this simple gift of a cup of warm water. Its reviving quality was instantaneous. Their parched lips formed smiles of gratitude as each asked for a refill.

The men then explained their predicament. They were part of a six man crew making repairs to the border fence. Their vehicle broke down four days ago leaving them stranded with nothing to sustain them but a few melons. After waiting three days, the group decided to send these two men in search of help while they still had the strength to walk. We told them there was nothing but a hundred miles of barren desert in the direction they were walking. Only by God’s providential hand were we traveling south on that unmapped trail on that day.

The two men crammed into our Land Rover and directed us to their broken-down vehicle.⁴⁶ There, we gave our remaining water to the other four men and also used it to fill the empty cells of the battery of their Toyota Land Cruiser. My dad marveled that these men would venture into the desert without an extra battery or supplies of food and drinking water. Using our jumper cables, we were able to jump start their vehicle. There were many expressions of gratitude and appreciation which gave us a wonderful opportunity to share the gospel.⁴⁷ Each man also gladly received a gospel tract. My father later wrote to these men, encouraging them to read and respond to the literature he gave them.

We arrived in Kuruman two days later. Crossing the Kalahari desert had been a wonderfully unique experience I will never forget. Little else of note occurred except that we did stumble upon an African puff adder one morning.⁴⁸ Of course, Africa abounds with snakes, several of which are deadly to humans. These include varieties of cobra, the boomslang, the green and black mambas, the gaboon viper, and the puff adder. Fortunately, all snakes try to avoid contact with humans. The problem is that puff adders are slow and generally just try to blend into their environment rather than flee into some hole. Consequently, people do get bitten when they inadvertently step on a puff adder. In all our years in Africa we only encountered venomous snakes three times, and twice it was the puff adder. On this occasion we kept our distance, took a couple pictures, and moved on.

No place on the African continent played a more significant role in the progress of the gospel than this little outpost on the edge of the desert called Kuruman.⁴⁹ It is the missionary landmark of the continent. It was Robert and Mary Moffat’s mission station for half a century. It was an oasis in the desert and a launching point for many a missionary and explorer. This outpost, seven hundred miles north of Cape Town, rescued many of the interior travelers from the ravages of hunger, thirst, and disease. It was the place from which David Livingstone set out on his explorations which opened the continent for later missionaries.⁵⁰ It was the success among failures which offered hope and courage to future generations of missionaries. It was an Alamo against the marauding Zulus, who had conquered every tribe between the Indian ocean and the Kalahari desert. Here, Robert Moffat

endeared himself to the hearts of the natives as he and a few Bechuanas turned back thousands of Zulu warriors and finally stopped the tide of genocide which had swept across southern Africa during the early nineteenth century.

Kuruman still lies off the beaten track and looks much as it did in Moffat & Livingstone's day. We walked through the Moffats' home.⁵¹ There were Mary's cooking utensils. There was Moffat's study where he labored over his Sechwana translation of the Bible. There was the communion set which Mary Moffat had requested by faith from London.⁵² It providentially arrived two years later on the eve of their first communion service. We walked in the very room where Moffat once stood between his family and angry Bechuana warriors, refusing to accept their ultimatum to leave or die. We held the very compass Robert Moffat used when he traveled hundreds of miles into present day Zimbabwe to visit the great monarch, Mosilikatze.⁵³ We held the handle of the printing press Moffat used to print the first African-language Bible. We saw the great wooden, church beams that Mosilikatze sent hundreds of miles to help build Moffat's church. But, nothing stirred us more than the many graves of missionary children. Few of the early missionaries were spared the ultimate price in blazing a trail for Christ into this dangerous and inhospitable continent.

(NAR) The Lord accomplished a change of heart in many lives that evening. Some of Derek's classmates had watery eyes. Others, a look of contrition. For some, it was an enlightenment. His dormitory supervisor spoke up,

Derek has done us all a great service this evening. He made the mission field real. Perhaps he made us ashamed of how self-focused our lives can be here in America. For some of us tonight his story was a boomerang. We felt sorry for the MKs when we should have felt sorry for ourselves! We can't all go to the mission field, but we can all participate in missions. Derek, welcome to our dormitory.

From that day many students referred to that dormitory as "the MK's dormitory."

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