

Two Lion Skins

By Vanessa Farmery

Late in 1963, just before Christmas, my father who was a Colonial Police Inspector at the small Nyasaland town of Ncheu, was approached by several alarmed locals. They reported that a young breeding pair of lions had been encroaching upon the land where their cattle grazed and had, in fact, taken a number of the herd. They and my father knew what this meant; if a lion loses its fear of man sufficiently to attack cattle then it is only a matter of time before they will take a child walking to school, a woman collecting water from the river or a man squatting in the long grass. My father, therefore, collected his men together and they went looking for the lions. Unsuccessful on that occasion they changed tack; the next day they set up traps using rifles baited with meat and this time both lions were shot and killed.

The lions were carried to our house where they were put on display for the people of the town to view; strange as it may sound very few of them had ever seen a lion before and the spectacle attracted hordes of curious onlookers who patiently queued at the gate and waited their turn to walk past and view the bodies. It also attracted the medicine men who wanted the teeth, claws and tips of the tails for their own dark and mysterious purposes; the lions were put under an armed guard.

In the pre-environmentally aware sixties Africa was still a colonial continent and a lion was more of a conversation piece when dead than a conservation piece when alive. My parents decided to have the pair turned into wall-hangings but they had to remove the pelts from the corpses, and fast; because of the process of decay in the tropics. Unfortunately, although there may be more than one way to skin a cat there was nobody who was qualified to perform the deed. No one, that is, except our gardener, Enoch, who was at that time considering the error of his ways in the local gaol as he had disgraced himself a few weeks earlier by stealing from the community grain store and my father had been unable to overlook this misdemeanour.



Discussions took place. Heads were scratched. Finally, Enoch was brought in to do the job and sat in the shade of the mulberry bushes at the bottom of the garden; the white-noise buzzing of flies attracted by the rank and bloody spoils was accompanied by intermittent bird calls and overlaid by his rhythmic scraping like Stone-Age Stig. He toiled in the regulation prison garb of loose cotton pyjamas patterned with arrows overseen by a silent

companion, a faceless, nameless prison guard who sweatily bore the brunt of the African sun from beneath his hat, his torso swathed in a thick, tightly buttoned uniform. Enoch removed the skins, stretched them and tanned them, drying them in the open air. He returned to the prison to complete his sentence (upon which he returned to us and resumed his duties).



The skins were sent to Southern Rhodesia (as it then was) to a Mission where they were mounted on hessian and bordered by green baize. My parents brought them to the UK at the end of their last tour in Malawi (as Nyasaland became on Independence) in 1969 and they hung on our walls for some twenty years when, having moved to a smaller property, they were placed in store prior to selling on in 2011. We would like to think that they will be hung together and seen and appreciated by their new owners, rather than having been kept in storage as we had latterly been doing.

Note: *Vanessa is the daughter of Doug and Dot Farmery. Doug joined the Nyasaland Police in October 1959 following service in the East Riding Constabulary (1950 to 1959).*