

TSAVO RIVER, KENYA · 1898

THE MAN-EATERS OF TSAVO

*Two Lions, a Railway Bridge,
and Nine Months of Terror*



THE LIONS THAT STOPPED THE LUNATIC LINE

GRAHAM KASINDO

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“The whole of the works were put to a stop because a pair of man-eating lions appeared in the locality and conceived a most unfortunate taste for our workmen.”

— Lord Salisbury, Prime Minister, to the House of Lords

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Prologue

TSAVO RIVER, BRITISH EAST AFRICA. MARCH 1898. NIGHT.

The tent was pitched at the railhead, in thorn country, a hundred and thirty miles from the sea.

Inside, a few men slept. One of them was a jemadar, a foreman, a big, powerful Sikh named **Ungan Singh**.

In the dark, something put its head through the open tent door.

It took Ungan Singh by the throat. The men in the tent heard him cry out one word. “Choro!” Let go.

Then he was gone, dragged out into the bush.

In the morning, his colleague reported it to the engineer in charge, a thirty-year-old British army officer named **John Henry Patterson**. Patterson followed the drag marks. He found what was left.

It was the first killing. It would not be the last. For the next nine months, two lions would hunt the men building a railway bridge across the Tsavo River, pulling them from tents, from hospitals and from railway carriages. The work would stop. Hundreds of men would run. The British Prime Minister would have to explain it in Parliament.

And more than a century later, scientists would still be arguing about how many people they ate.

CHAPTER ONE

The Lunatic Line

In **1896**, the British began building a railway from the port of **Mombasa** towards **Lake Victoria**, nearly six hundred miles inland.

It was one of the most expensive and most mocked projects of the empire. In London, the MP **Henry Labouchère** wrote a poem about it and called it “a gigantic folly.” People started calling it the **Lunatic Line**.

To build it, Britain brought workers from India. More than **30,000** men were contracted, most of them from the **Punjab** and **Gujarat**. They laid the track through desert, swamp and forest. They faced disease, famine, accidents and wild animals. Historians estimate that several thousand of them died before it was finished.

By early 1898, the railhead had reached the **Tsavo River**.

The river had to be bridged. Somebody had to build the bridge.

CHAPTER TWO

The Engineer

MOMBASA. 1 MARCH 1898.

John Henry Patterson was born on **10 November 1867** in **Forgney, County Longford**, Ireland. He joined the British Army at seventeen. By 1898, he was an army officer and a trained engineer.

“It was towards noon on March 1, 1898,” he later wrote, “that I first found myself entering the narrow and somewhat dangerous harbour of Mombasa.”

From there he went up the line to Tsavo, to take charge of the bridge.

Tsavo was hot, dry and full of game. The workers' camps were spread out along about eight miles of line. There was plenty of thorn bush and very little else.

Patterson had been there for about three weeks when Ugan Singh was taken.

CHAPTER THREE

The Thorn Fences

At first, it seemed like one lion, and it seemed like bad luck.

It wasn't. Men kept disappearing. The attacks moved from camp to camp, as if the lions had worked out which ones were least protected.

The camps were surrounded with **bomas**, thick fences of thorn bush. Fires were kept burning through the night.

It made no difference.

"The camps of the workmen had also been surrounded by thorn fences," Patterson wrote; "nevertheless the lions managed to jump over or to break through."

They broke into the hospital tent. Patterson described one lion jumping on a tent "in which eight patients were lying." Two of the sick men were badly hurt in the attack. The hospital was moved. The lions followed it.

"Again it was decided to move the hospital," Patterson wrote, "and again, before nightfall, the work was completed, including a still stronger and thicker boma."

Patterson sat up night after night in trees with his rifle, waiting near the places where the lions had struck. They struck somewhere else.

CHAPTER FOUR

Devils

The workers had their own explanation.

“Many a time the coolies solemnly assured me that it was absolutely useless to attempt to shoot them,” Patterson wrote. “They were quite convinced that the angry spirits of two departed native chiefs had taken this form in order to protest against a railway being made through their country.”

To the men in the camps, these were not ordinary animals. They took men from the middle of lit, fenced camps. They ignored traps.

The lions were two males, and neither had a mane. Later generations would give them names from a Hollywood film: *the Ghost* and *the Darkness*.

The men who lived with them in 1898 simply waited for the night.

“In the whole of my life,” Patterson wrote, “I have never experienced anything more nerve-shaking than to hear the deep roars of these dreadful monsters growing gradually nearer and nearer, and to know that some one or other of us was doomed to be their victim before morning dawned.”

CHAPTER FIVE

The Train

TSAVO. 1 DECEMBER 1898.

By December, the workers had had enough.

Patterson came back to camp on the afternoon of **1 December** and, in his words, “found... that the men had all struck work.”

They wanted to leave. Nobody could make them stay.

“Some hundreds of them stopped the first passing train by throwing themselves on the rails in front of the engine,” he wrote, “and then, swarming on to the trucks and throwing in their possessions anyhow, they fled from the accursed spot.”

Construction of the bridge stopped.

“For the next three weeks,” Patterson wrote, “practically nothing was done but build ‘lion-proof’ huts for those workmen who had had sufficient courage to remain.”

The men who stayed slept wherever they thought a lion couldn’t reach. They slept on top of water tanks, on roofs, on the iron girders of the bridge. “Every good-sized tree in the camp,” Patterson wrote, “had as many beds lashed on to it as its branches would bear.”

In London, the Prime Minister, **Lord Salisbury**, had to explain the delay to the House of Lords.

“The whole of the works were put to a stop,” he said, “because a pair of man-eating lions appeared in the locality and conceived a most unfortunate taste for our workmen.”

CHAPTER SIX

The Cutting

TSAVO. DECEMBER 1898. NIGHT.

The District Officer, **Whitehead**, came up the line to help. Patterson expected him that evening and waited. He didn't arrive.

Whitehead had got off the train and was walking up to Patterson's camp in the dark with a sergeant, **Abdullah**. Their path went through a cutting.

"All went well," Patterson wrote, "until they were about half-way through the gloomy cutting, when one of the lions suddenly jumped down upon them from the high bank, knocking Whitehead over like a ninepin, and tearing his back."

The lion let Whitehead go and took Abdullah instead.

Whitehead survived, with four long claw wounds down his back. Abdullah was killed.

Soon afterwards, reinforcements arrived: about twenty armed sepoys. Now there were soldiers, rifles and a British officer with a wound to show for it. The lions were still out there.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Trap

Patterson built a trap.

It was a heavy cage made of railway sleepers and iron rails, split into two compartments. The lion would walk into one; a door would drop behind it. In the other compartment, behind strong bars, sat the bait.

The bait was men. Two of the sepoys, armed with a rifle and plenty of ammunition, were put inside, with orders to shoot any lion that came in.

At about nine o'clock one night, the camp heard the trap door fall.

A lion was in the cage.

According to accounts of the night, the sepoys inside were so terrified that at first they didn't fire at all. When they did, they fired wildly. One bullet shot away one of the bars of the door.

The lion got out and disappeared into the dark.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Nine December

TSAVO. 9 DECEMBER 1898.

A lion attacked a man near the camp and killed a donkey instead.

Patterson saw his chance. The lion would come back to the carcass. Near it, he built a flimsy platform, a *machan*, about twelve feet high, and climbed up to wait.

The lion came. But it didn't go for the donkey.

For about two hours, according to accounts of that night, it circled the platform in the dark, stalking the man on top of it, edging a little nearer each time.

Patterson fired.

The lion bounded off into the bush. He could hear it. By the morning, it was dead, a short distance away.

It measured, in his words, "nine feet eight inches" from the tip of its nose to the tip of its tail. It took eight men to carry it back to camp.

The workers came out of their tents and their trees to see it. After nine months, one of the devils was a dead animal on the ground.

There was still another.

CHAPTER NINE

Twenty-Nine December

TSAVO. 27–29 DECEMBER 1898.

The second lion was harder to kill.

Patterson hit it first from a platform near some goats it had come for. It was wounded, and it got away. Over the nights that followed, it came back, and he hit it again.

He sat up again in the same tree. It came again.

On **29 December**, it charged. Patterson fired. He fired again. He changed rifles. In all, according to the accounts of the hunt, he fired nine shots with three different rifles, and six of them hit. The last shots went into its chest and its head.

By Patterson's account, it died biting savagely at a branch.

It measured “nine feet six inches from tip of nose to tip of tail.”

On the Tsavo River, it was over. The workers came back. The work started again.

In **February 1899**, the bridge was finished.

CHAPTER TEN

The Silver Bowl

TSAVO. 30 JANUARY 1899.

Before the bridge was even finished, the workers gave Patterson a present: a silver bowl.

The inscription read: “We, your Overseer, Timekeepers, Mistaris and Workmen, present you with this bowl as a token of our gratitude to you for your bravery in killing two man-eating lions at great risk to your own life.”

The lions were skinned. Patterson took the skins home. For about twenty-five years, they lay on the floors of his house as rugs.

In **1907**, he published *The Man-Eaters of Tsavo*. It became a classic. It gave the world the story, and it gave the world his number: he said the two lions had eaten **135** people.

In **1924**, he sold the skins and skulls to the **Field Museum** in **Chicago** for **\$5,000**. They arrived in poor condition and were rebuilt as mounted lions. They are still on display there.

In **1996**, Hollywood turned the story into a film, *The Ghost and the Darkness*.

The two lions of Tsavo had become the most famous man-eaters in the world.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Hairs in the Teeth

But how many people did they really eat?

Patterson's own figures changed. The number most often quoted, 135, is his later one. In a **2001** review of his original handwritten journal, researchers concluded that about **28 to 31** Indian workers were most likely killed. Nobody wrote down how many Africans died. Their deaths, the review noted, were not documented.

In **2009**, scientists tested the chemistry of the lions' bones and hair. They estimated that one lion had eaten about **10.5** people and the other about **24.2**. The total could still have been as high as seventy-two.

In **2017**, a study found that one of the lions had a badly infected root under a broken canine tooth. It would have struggled to kill large prey like zebra or wildebeest.

Other theories pointed to the land itself. In **1898**, the cattle disease **rinderpest** had swept the region, wiping out cattle and wild animals like buffalo. And the old slave caravan route to the coast had crossed the Tsavo River. Some scientists believe the lions may have learned, long before the railway came, that human bodies were food.

Then came the hairs.

In the early 1990s, **Thomas Gnoske**, a collections manager at the Field Museum, found hairs packed into the broken teeth of the two skulls. In **October 2024**, a team from the Field Museum and the **University of Illinois**, working with **Ogeto Mwebi** of the **National Museums of Kenya** and **Nduhiu Gitahi** of the **University of Nairobi**, published what the hairs were.

They were from giraffe, oryx, waterbuck, wildebeest, zebra, lion, and human beings.

The DNA also showed the two lions shared the same mother's line. As the early accounts had said, they were very probably brothers.

And there was one animal missing. The lions of Tsavo today prefer buffalo. There was no buffalo in the teeth. Patterson's journal never recorded seeing any buffalo either. The rinderpest had got there first.

Epilogue

KIMA STATION. 6 JUNE 1900. ABOUT 2 A.M.

The Tsavo lions were dead. The railway went on. And the lions of the line had not finished.

At **Kima**, further up the line, another man-eater was taking railway workers. The Assistant Superintendent of the Uganda Railway Police, **Charles Henry Ryall**, twenty-five years old, came to hunt it. With two companions, **Huebner** and **Parenti**, he waited for it in a railway carriage parked at the station.

At about two in the morning, the lion came into the carriage and took Ryall.

“Death must have been almost instantaneous,” the official gazette said.

He is buried in Nairobi. The carriage is in the **Nairobi Railway Museum**. The plaque on it reads: “It was from this wagon that Charles Henry Ryall was dragged and killed by a man-eating lion at Kima station on June 6, 1900.”

The Tsavo lions are not in Kenya. They are in Chicago. The chief curator of the Nairobi Railway Museum, **Maurice Wekesa Barasa**, has said what many Kenyans feel: “The Chicago Field Museum should return our heritage. This is their home, and not America.”

The bridge still crosses the Tsavo River. The railway it carried made Nairobi, and much of modern Kenya with it.

And somewhere along the line lie the men who built it and never went home: the Sikhs and Punjabis whose names Patterson wrote in his journal, and the Africans whose names nobody wrote down at all.

THE RECORD

PLACE	Tsavo River bridge, Uganda Railway
DATES	March – December 1898
THE LIONS	Two maneless males, probably brothers
FIRST KILLED	9 December 1898; 9 ft 8 in
SECOND KILLED	29 December 1898; 9 ft 6 in; nine shots, six hits
PATTERSON'S COUNT	135
JOURNAL REVIEW (2001)	About 28–31 Indian workers; African deaths unrecorded
BONE CHEMISTRY (2009)	About 35 between them; possibly up to 72
WHERE THEY ARE NOW	Field Museum, Chicago, since 1924

Two lions. One bridge. Nobody knows how many men.

A Note from the Author

If this story stayed with you, you can buy me a coffee. It keeps the research going and helps bring the next one to you.

LIPA NA M-PESA	
PAYBILL	522533
ACCOUNT	8129965
CLICK MTAA TECHNOLOGIES	

Asante sana.

— *Graham Kasindo*