

## Eugene Dubnov / TWO STORIES

### CROCUTA CROCUTA

Because of their voices, hyenas are thought of by the Arabs and Persians as semi-human. They can assume the guise of a beautiful maiden and entice a man—and then revert to their animal form and devour him.

The hyenas form a separate family (Hyaenidae) of the order of predatory mammals (Carnivora). They are characterized by a large head, powerful jaws and long forelegs. There are two species, the striped and the spotted hyena. The striped hyena most often feeds on carrion, whereas the spotted hyena is a true predator. The colour of the spotted hyena is a yellowish-grey, and the round spots on its body are dark-brown or black. The jaws of the spotted hyena, in proportion to the size of its body, are the most powerful of any mammal.

In tropical Africa the female hyenas come on heat in the rainy season. The external genitalia of the female are so similar to those of the male that it is easy to confuse the sexes. This is why Aristotle thought hyenas were hermaphrodites. Sexual maturity is reached by the males at the age of two and by the females at the age of three.

Hyenas like open spaces. They often hunt in packs, but also enjoy hunting solitarily. The spotted hyena is not to be despised as a predator: it is a big-game hunter. This fact was long unrecognized because of the hyena's reputation as a carrion-feeder. The spotted hyena is capable of astonishing boldness and often pursues healthy adult animals until they are exhausted.

In most cases where spotted hyenas and lions have been observed feeding on the carcass of a slain animal, it is the hyenas that have made the kill.

In the spotted hyena the senses of sight, hearing and smell are all very keen.

Relations between man and the hyena have varied. In some places it has been protected as a useful scavenger, whereas in others it has been looked upon with superstitious horror. There have been cases of hyenas attacking man with fatal consequences for the latter.

The spotted hyena has a surprisingly large repertoire of vocal sounds. It growls, yelps, howls and emits many other noises. The well-known laugh of the hyena is uttered by the beast when it is being attacked or pursued. The characteristic wailing noise is made spontaneously by lone individuals; this sound, initially low-pitched, gradually becomes louder and higher.

In captivity the spotted hyena can live for quite a long time if it is properly looked after—up to forty years or more in some recorded cases.

SEE EDINBURGH BY BUS. *Edinburgh Zoo*—At Corstophine is justly renowned. With over 75 acres of ground it is ideally situated not only to display the animals at their best but also to provide a point from which extensive views of the countryside are possible. Travel by Services 12, 26, 31 or 86 from the garden side of Princes Street.

I took a No. 12 bus from Princes Street. It carried me up Shandwick Place, then along West Maitland Street, through the Haymarket, by Haymarket Terrace into West Coast, then along Roseburn Terrace, and, finally, down Corstophine Road, past Murrayfield, up to the Zoo itself.

This was in December, and the weather was dreadful: it was cold,

and a bitter wind blew, sometimes bringing with it showers of rain.

After walking round the Zoo for a bit, I came across the hyena's cage. The hyena and I looked at each other and evidently took to each other. As I moved myself in order to get a better view of the cage, I noticed that the hyena was intently watching my every step: it made exactly the same movement as I, and in the same direction. Then I began to test the quickness of its reactions. I made as though to move to the left—and the hyena strained to the leftward with all its body—but then I suddenly moved to the right, and the hyena immediately followed suit. In this way we played games, hunting one another, probably for as much as an hour. I invented increasingly complicated stratagems—like the figures in a dance—for instance stepping back from the cage and making a diagonal movement. The hyena exactly duplicated all my moves.

At length I looked at my watch and realized that it was time to go. The Zoo would be closing in about an hour, and I had hardly seen anything yet.

When I started going away in the rightward direction, the hyena once more imitated my movements and, pacing me, walked to the very end of the cage. There it stopped still and looked at me questioningly, as though awaiting my next move. But I did not stop and continued to walk quickly on. Realizing that I was leaving, the beast broke into a howl and began to beat itself against the bars. The rattling of the cage and the howling of the animal made me, against my will, look back. When I saw the hyena thrusting itself against the bars, trying to get out to me, I couldn't resist coming back. All at once it calmed down, and we continued our game. About another hour went by, and a passing keeper informed me that the Zoo was about to close. I had not even noticed that it was already growing dark.

This time I did not look back. But the creature's wild cries, almost indistinguishable from the sounds of human grief, mingled with the clangour of the bars, still sound in my ears.

THE ROYAL ZOOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF SCOTLAND  
SCOTTISH NATIONAL ZOOLOGICAL PARK  
MURRAYFIELD • EDINBURGH • EH12 6TS

12th March, 1985

Dear Mr Dubnov,

With reference to your letter of the 28th February, I was most interested in the behaviour of the Spotted Hyena as you described it. I talked to the animal's keepers and they have not experienced this before, but it is often the case that a particular animal becomes attracted to a specific member of the public and behavioural changes are observed, often they show behaviour that is only shown to other members of their species. . . .

I hope that this is of use to you,

Yours sincerely,

/E. Leonard/

p.p. Dr. Miranda Stevenson,  
Curator of Animals

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28th March, 1985

Dear Mr Dubnov,

Thank you for your letter which has been passed to my desk for comments.

The interesting behaviour which you have described has in fact been witnessed by myself, and I am sure others, on several occasions, though not specifically in the species you mentioned.

My own opinion is that wild animals under captive conditions frequently become bored, particularly if deprived of company of their own kind, and they will then substitute either a human or another animal species upon which to focus their attention for the purpose of play, aggression, sex or other basic emotional instincts. . . .

We do not have any spotted Hyenas at either of our Zoo parks. Hoping the foregoing is of some help to you.

Yours sincerely,

M. Lockyer,  
Manager.

Author's Note: I am grateful to Dr. Stevenson and Mr. Lockyer for permission to quote their letters in this story.

## A SCHOOL OUTING

We both felt nervous and kept looking at the clock. "What if they take pity on us and stop the train?" asked Ublyudkin. His real name was nothing like Ublyudkin—which means Mongrelson. In fact, it was Konyaenko, meaning Steedman, and I don't remember now why or when I started calling him Mongrelson. He didn't object, but he asked me to take care not to call him that in front of his parents. "Don't be daft," I waved him aside. "Have you ever heard of a train being stopped for the sake of a couple of late-comers?" But I wasn't that sure myself. The hour hand was now pointing exactly at eight, and the minute hand was creeping up to twelve. I peeped out gingerly onto the platform from the covered exit of the stairway. The platform was almost deserted. The last few passengers were hurriedly scrambling into the carriages. That meant we should certainly be noticed.

"How does it look?" asked Mongrelson in an anxious whisper when I drew my nose back under cover.

"Okay," I replied. "Hardly anybody left on the platform."

"Which carriage do you think they're in?"

"No idea. We have to act as if they were in all of them."

"But at the same time we've got to look in the windows," said Mongrelson, as if this were a new idea, although we'd discussed all these details many times before. "We have to look in the windows, and try twice as hard if we see them."

"Of course," I replied. "But when the train moves off and starts picking up speed, it won't be that easy to spot them."

This too had been taken into account at our previous discussions.

I glanced at the clock again. The minute hand was now pointing straight at twelve. I raised my arm. The whistle blew. I gave a theatrical and totally unnecessary signal; "Here we go!"

Mongrelson whispered, and we both rushed out onto the platform.

We acted the part of late arrivals so well that I swear I was afraid they really would stop the train, in defiance of all the regulations. We dashed along the platform, waving our arms ridiculously, casting despairing glances into the carriage windows, mouths gaping, and from time to time even calling out: "Stop!"

At first I could distinguish faces in the windows, looking at us with surprise or sympathy, some of them smiling, but soon they all started to merge, rather like the play of patches on the surface of a river, if you look at one closely and for a long time. Then the last carriage flew by, suddenly revealing the stillness and the silence behind it. We stopped, drew breath, and began swapping impressions.

Our general opinion was that the performance had been a success. Of course, nobody could guarantee that we had been seen, but the chances that we had were not bad at all. After all, it only took one person out of our class of forty to notice us, to ensure that everybody else, including Antonina, would learn of it at once.

"I can just see Antonina raising her eyes to heaven and groaning, 'Every family has its black sheep!'" I said.

"More likely she'll make some crack: 'So Horsey Name couldn't get the Estonian State Coach to the station in time, eh?'" said Mongrelson, and we both burst out laughing.

Antonina—in full, Antonina Ivanovna—was our class teacher. She taught us language and literature. We were all afraid of her. She was a bit dotty anyway, and, what's more, she had a sadistic streak. She enjoyed humiliating us, giving us insulting nicknames. Mongrelson, for instance (of course, I'd given him a rather unflattering name myself, but in an affectionate, joking way, as a good friend)—him she called Horsey Name. "Horsey Name will now canter up to the blackboard," she would say. But he was one of the luckier ones: others had far worse nicknames. Titchy little Spalagutov, for example, was called Birdie. "Chirp a little louder, Birdie," she would say. "We can't hear what you're chirruping about." Molokov, who had rather slanted eyes and a swarthy face, was Tartar Yoke. "How long do we have to suffer under your rule, Tartar Yoke?!" she would scream when he gave a wrong answer in a lesson. I was dubbed the Estonian State Coach, because she thought me too proud, and because I came from Tallinn. Once the year before when I hadn't gone on one of their outings, she



remarked on my absence in the following dramatic manner: "Lo and behold, the Estonian State Coach has not deigned to honour us with his presence?" (Birdie reported this to me later, adding that he preferred his nickname to mine). But as a rule she only used her nickname for me behind my back, perhaps because she had other, more spectacular ways of humiliating me directly. For example, only a few weeks earlier she had berated me for the composition I'd written on a subject of my own choice, describing the pond in Petrovskiy Park. I had to stand for a whole lesson, while she summoned all as witnesses to my highly suspicious love for ponds. "We Soviet people have no wish to dig in mud, dirt and mire," she said scornfully and demanded of the class: "Who among you here could ever be a friend to a person like that?" (Mongrelson, although he didn't dare say straight out that he was my friend, nevertheless stood up and said my ways could still be rectified.) Then the bell rang for break and saved me, ashamed as I was to look my classmates in the eye.

Attendance at these outings of theirs wasn't strictly compulsory, but today's trip was a bit different. This time those who didn't go were going to have to clean up the school as a punishment, and it was this position between hammer and anvil which had forced us to focus all our mental powers on the search for a way out. That was how our plan was conceived. We couldn't be counted as absent, because we'd been present, if late. We thought, furthermore, that our belated arrival and our desperate behaviour on the platform would cause even the sadist Antonina to feel just a little sorry for us. All this gave ground for hope that we wouldn't be punished for not cleaning up the school, but would be left in peace.

Still laughing at the picture we could so vividly imagine of Mongrelson harnessed to me, we went to buy tickets and then on to the other platform, from which trains left in the direction of the beach, the opposite direction to the one our outing had taken. It was May, the morning sun was growing warmer every minute, and we felt happy, having escaped both the outing and the cleaning-up job.

The train arrived and we got in. During the journey we laughed at each other endlessly as we recalled how idiotic we looked on the platform, with all our wild leaps, grimaces and gestures. We talked and laughed so loudly that the other people in the carriage started smiling as they looked at us.



We got out at Lielupe, the first station on the beach, named after the river that runs past there. The sun was already quite hot, and near the station we drank some cold beer under a toadstool sunshade. The sea was only ten or fifteen minutes' walk away. On the beach we changed into our swimming trunks and walked to the right, towards the mouth of the river. The beach was deserted: hardly anybody ever came to this corner of it. We hadn't come this far before either. Striding quickly along in the warm breeze, beside the waves, we walked and walked, until at last we noticed how the sea appeared to divide on the horizon. A yellow tint showed in the blue waves; it must have been river silt. The water of the river itself, when we reached its bank, was a dun brown colour. It rushed on with such force that not even the sea could have stopped it, if it had wanted to.

After a dip (the bottom was sticky and slimy) we started digging in the sand and mud under the bank. I dug up a few worms, which Mongrelson called leeches, to spite me, and he found two maggots and a slug. Then we clambered up higher, right to the pine-trees, where the sand had a thin covering of grass and pine needles. There we saw a lizard, and even came close to catching him. Returning to the river, we sat down a little further along, on the bank of a small backwater, and dangled our feet in it. When you looked closely, the water was teeming with life: a variety of aquatic insects, spiders, water fleas and ticks were whizzing around, and beneath them, when the sun pierced the amber depths of the water, you could see little fish darting to and fro. "That's what's known as fresh-water fauna," said Mongrelson solemnly. "Remember the way Antonina told me off about it?" I asked, and we both burst into hoots of carefree laughter.

The first drops of rain fell, and it was only then that we noticed how the sky had become covered with clouds. We started running back, then slowed our pace to a walk when we got tired, then started running again. The rain was light and warm.

At the station we were lucky: the train arrived at once, it was a fast one, and in a quarter of an hour we were back in the town. "That was a jolly good outing, wasn't it?" Mongrelson said, as we got out on the platform.

*Translated from Russian by Kevin Windle*