

# Timeless Life and Sudden Death

Robert Lowry

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THE CURVE AND THE TUSK. By Stuart Cloete. 272 pp. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company. \$3.

To the naked natives he was “The Great One” — as potent and ageless as Africa. To the local Portuguese administrator, he was one huge, vicious headache haunting Mozambique. To Maniero, the hunter, he was the challenge of a lifetime, a leviathan among elephants.

Big as a house and elusive as a mouse, The Great One butts and stomps his way through the philosophical underbrush of Stuart Cloete’s fifth novel, killing all who challenge him and disappearing for years at a time to give Mr. Cloete room to write a tale of timeless life and sudden death around him. At its tenderest, this is Mashupa’s story. He left the bush to find work as a houseboy in Lourenço Marques — and found N’Tembi as well. Raised by white missionaries, black N’Tembi was as breath — taking as an African dawn. She and Mashupa went to live in a corrugated iron house that was really a passionate paradise — until jungle law caught up with them. In marrying, they had violated a tribal taboo. As expiation, said a witch doctor, Mashupa must smear himself with a magic mixture of elephant dung, eyelashes and pus, and go to live alone in the forest for twelve moons.

Reluctantly, Mashupa went. Love sent N’Tembi after him. One day, hidden in a giant tree, half-starved from a diet of birds and berries. Mashupa “thought the spirits had driven him mad at last, for the voice was the voice of N’Tembi. She sang a song of grief and loneliness. She sang his name — crying out ‘Mashupa, oh, Mashupa!’” Hurrying to her, he forgot about the elephant dung. The Great One smelled him and killed them both.

BRITISH-bred Stuart Cloete has spent most of his 55 years in South Africa (where he ran a couple of ranches) and in London (where he wrote his novels). Fed up with processed foods, TV and civilized confusion, he “returned to the wilds” of Mozambique to give primitive reality a closer look. “The Curve and the Tusk” is his passionate report of what he saw — puzzled natives caught between tribal certainties and civilized temptations. greedy white men upsetting the forest’s natural balance, and life’s meaning reaffirmed in the interdependence of all living things.

Artistically, Mr. Cloete might better have cut his conversational safaris into philosophy shorter, junked his obtruding introduction and appendix and stayed hotter on his fictional trail. But the heartbeat of his loose-jointed book is as strong and sweet as life. It gives a mighty thump when Maniero the hunter, comes face to face at last with his fabulous prey. It taps out a steady tattoo of conviction behind Mr. Cloete’s intentions: “to clarify ... the black African’s outlook, to explain his great problem, which is the white problem, and to break down ... the notion that he is a kind of half baboon.”

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Mr. Lowry is the author of “The Wolf That Fed Us” and other novels.

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