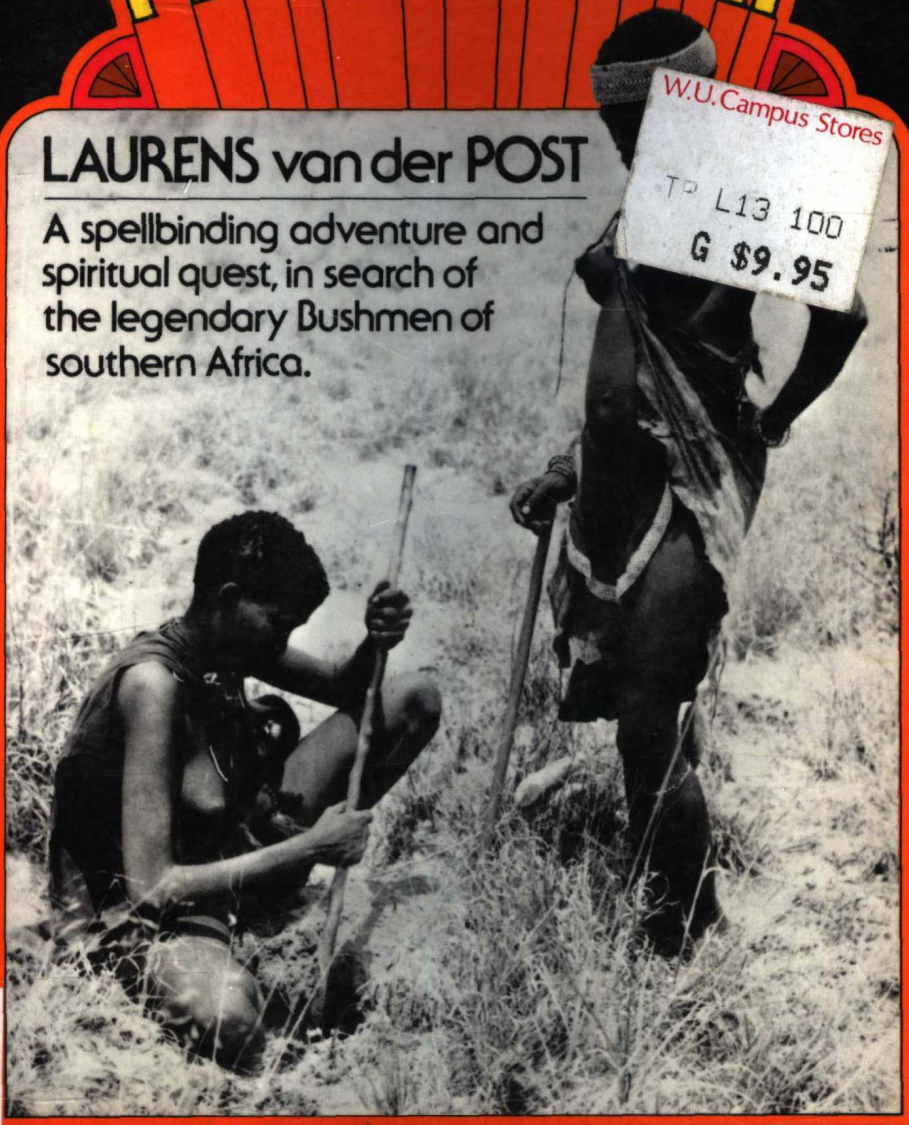
A Harvest/HBJ Book

THE LOST WORLD OF THE KALAHARI

LAURENS van der POST

A spellbinding adventure and spiritual quest, in search of the legendary Bushmen of southern Africa.



THE LOST WORLD OF THE KALAHARI

Harvest/HBJ edition published by arrangement with William Morrow and Company

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Van der Post, Laurens.
The lost world of the Kalahari.
(A Harvest/HBJ book)
Reprint of the ed. published by Morrow, New York.
1. San (African people) 2. Kalahari Desert.
I. Title.
[DT737.V36 1977] 968'.1 77-4292
ISBN 0-15-653706-0

Printed in the United States of America

E F G H I J

To the memory of Klara who had a Bushman mother and nursed me from birth;

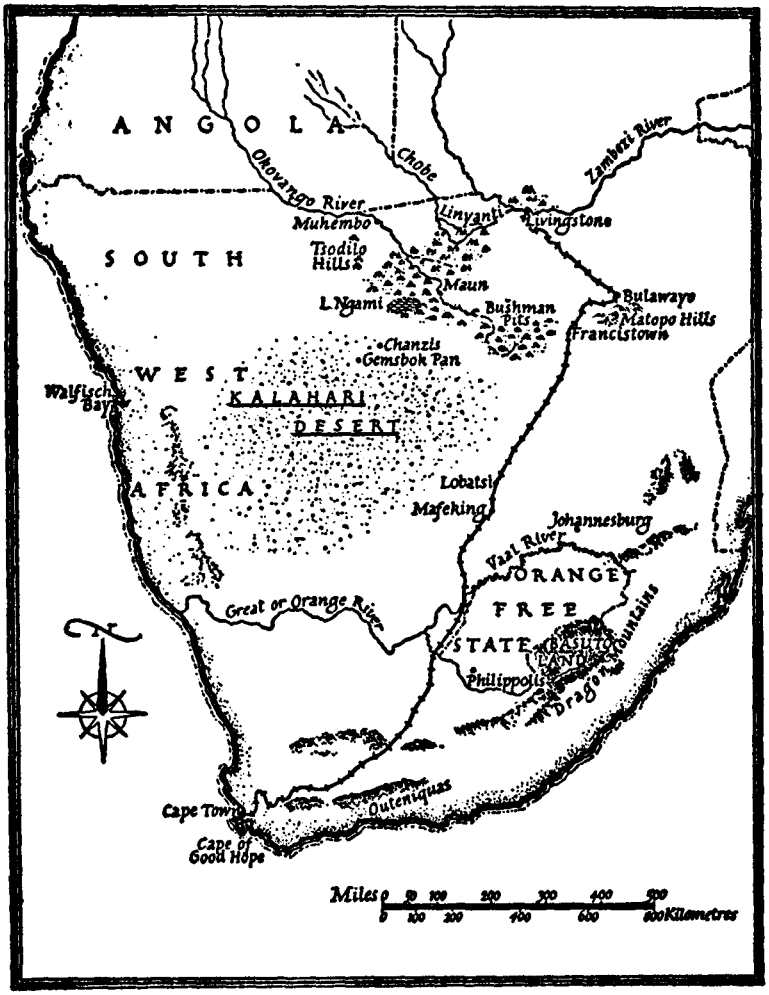
And to my wife, Ingaret Giffard, for saying without hesitation when I mentioned the journey to her: "But you must go and do it at once."

CONTENTS

Chapter

1. The Vanished People 3
2. The Manner of Their Going 35
3. The Pact and the Random Years 54
4. The Break-Through 68
5. The Shadow In Between 83
6. Northern Approaches 102
7. The Swamp of Despond 130
8. The Spirits of the Slippery Hills 188
9. The Hunter at the Well 218
10. The Song of the Rain 254

THE LOST WORLD OF THE KALAHARI



Map of Southern Africa showing the main features mentioned in the story.

Chapter 1

THE VANISHED PEOPLE

THIS is the story of a journey in a great wasteland and a search for some pure remnant of the unique and almost vanished First People of my native land, the Bushmen of Africa. The journey in fact was accomplished barely a year ago, but in a deeper sense it began long before that. Indeed, so far back in time does all this go that I am unable to determine precisely when it did begin. I know for certain only that no sooner did I become aware of myself as a child than my imagination slipped, like a hand into a glove, into a profound preoccupation with the little Bushman and his terrible fate.

I was born near the Great River, in the heart of what, for thousands of years had been great Bushman country. The Bushman himself as a coherent entity had already gone, but I was surrounded from birth by so many moving fragments of his race and culture that I felt him extraordinarily near. I was always meeting him afresh on the lips of living men. Beside the open hearth on cold winters' nights on my mother's farm

of Wolwekop, "the Mountain of the Wolves" (as my countrymen call the big striped hyenas), or round the campfire with the jackals' mournful bark raising an apprehensive bleat from a newly lambed ewe in the flock kraaled nearby, and with the night plover wailing over the black plain like a bosun's pipe, there the vanished Bushman would be vividly at the centre of some hardy pioneering reminiscence: a Bushman gay, gallant, mischievous, unpredictable, and to the end unrepentant and defiant. Though gone from the land, he still stalked life in the mixed blood of the coloured peoples as subtly as he ever stalked the multitudinous game of Africa. He was present in the eyes of one of the first women to nurse me, her shining gaze drawn from the first light of some unbelievably antique African day. Here a strain of Bushman blood would give an otherwise good Bantu face an odd Mongolian slant, there turn a good central African black into an apricot yellow or just break out, like a spark of electricity, in the clicks of onomatopoeic invention which the Bushman had forced on an invader's sonorous tongue.

The older I grew the more I resented that I had come too late to know him in his natural setting. For many years I could not accept that the door was closed for ever on the Bushman. I went on seeking for news and information of him as if preparing for the moment when the door would open and he would reappear in our midst. Indeed I believe the first objective question I ever asked of life was, "Who, really, was the Bushman?" I asked it of people of all races and colours who might have had contact with him, to the point where many a patient heart must have found it hard to bear with the uncomprehended importunity of a child. They told me much. But what they told me only made me hunger for more.

They said he was a little man, not a dwarf or pigmy, but just a little man about five feet in height. He was well, stur-

dily and truly made. His shoulders were broad but his hands and feet were extraordinarily small and finely modelled. The oldest of our 'Suto servants told me that one had only to see his small precise footprints in the sand never to forget them. His ankles were slim like a race-horse's, his legs supple, his muscles loose, and he ran like the wind, fast and long. In fact when on the move he hardly ever walked but, like the springbuck or wild dog, travelled at an easy trot. There had never been anyone who could run like him over the veld and boulders, and the bones of many a lone Basuto and Koranna were bleaching in the sun to prove how vainly they had tried to outdistance him. His skin was loose and very soon became creased and incredibly wrinkled. When he laughed, which he did easily, his face broke into innumerable little folds and pleats of a most subtle and endearing criss-cross pattern. My pious old grandfather explained that this loose plastic skin was "a wise dispensation of Almighty Providence" to enable the Bushman to eat more food at one feasting than any man in the history of mankind had ever eaten before. His life as a hunter made it of vital importance that he should be able to store great reserves of food in his body. As a result, his stomach, after he had eaten to capacity, made even a man look like a pregnant woman. In a good hunting season his figure was like that of a Rubens' Cupid, protruding in front and even more behind. Yes, that was another of the unique characteristics of this original little Bushman body. It had a behind which served it rather as the hump serves the camel! In this way nature enabled him to store a reserve of valuable fats and carbo-hydrates against dry and hungry moments. I believe the first scientific term I ever learned was the name anatomists gave to this phenomenon of the Bushman body: "steatopygia." One night by the fireside I seem to remember my grandfather and the oldest of my aunts saying that in a lean time the Bushman behind would shrink until it was much

like any normal behind except for the satiny creases where his smooth buttocks joined his supple legs. But in a good hunting season it would stick out so much that you could stand a bottle of brandy with a tumbler on it! We all laughed at this, not derisively but with affectionate pride and wonder that our native earth should have produced so unique a little human body. Somehow, my heart and imagination were deeply concerned with this matter of the Bushman's shape. The Hottentots, who were very like him, much as I loved them, could not excite my spirit as did the Bushman. They were too big. The Bushman was just right. There was magic in his build. Whenever my mother read us a fairy-tale with a little man performing wonders in it, he was immediately transformed in my imagination into a Bushman. Perhaps this life of ours, which begins as a quest of the child for the man, and ends as a journey by the man to rediscover the child, needs a clear image of some child-man, like the Bushman, wherein the two are firmly and lovingly joined, in order that our confused hearts may stay at the centre of their brief round of departure and return.

But the Bushman's appetite, shape and steatopygia were, though remarkable, by no means the only unique features of his body. His colour, I was told, was unlike that of any other of the many peoples of Africa, a lovely Provençal apricot yellow. The old Basuto I have quoted told me that one most remarkable thing about the Bushman was that although he wore no clothes his skin never burned dark in the sun. He moved in the glare and glitter of Africa with a flame-like flicker of gold like a fresh young Mongol of the central Mongolian plain. His cheeks, too, were high-boned like a Mongol's and his wide eyes so slanted that some of my ancestors spoke of him as a "Chinese-person." There is a great plain between blue hills in South Africa called to this day the Chinese Vlakte after the Bushman hunters who once inhabited it. His eyes

were of the deep brown I have mentioned, a brown not seen in any other eye except in those of the antelope. It was clear and shone like the brown of day on a rare dewy African morning, and was unbelievably penetrating and accurate. He could see things at a distance where other people could discern nothing, and his powers of vision have become part of the heroic legend in Africa. The shape of the face tended to be heart-like, his forehead broad and chin sensitive and pointed. His ears were Pan-like, finely made and pointed. His hair was black and grew in thick round clusters which my countrymen called, with that aptitude for scornful metaphor they unfailingly exercised on his behalf, "peppercorn hair." His head was round, neatly and easily joined to a slender neck and throat on broad shoulders. His nose tended to be broad and flat, the lips full and the teeth even and dazzlingly white. His lips were narrow and, as my aunt said, "Lord, verily it has been a beautiful thing to see him move!"

But perhaps the most remarkable thing about the Bushman was his originality. Even in the deepest and most intimate source of his physical being he was made differently from other men. The women were born with a natural little apron, the so-called *tablier égyptien*, over their genitals; the men were born, lived and died with their sexual organs in a semi-erect position. The Bushman found dignity in this fact and made no attempt falsely to conceal it. Indeed he accepted it so completely, as the most important difference between himself and other men, that he gave his people the name of *Qhwai-xkhwe* which openly proclaims this fact. The sound of natural relish that the word *qhwai-xkhwe* makes on his lips is a joy to hear, and the click of the complex consonants flashes on his tongue as he utters them like a sparkle of sun on a burst of flower from our sombre mountain gorse. He has even painted himself all over the rocks of Africa in naked silhouette plainly demonstrating this distinguishing feature of

his race, not with the obscene intent which some European archaeologists have projected into him, but simply because his God, with care aforethought, in the great smithy of Africa had forged him naked and unashamed just like that.

Only one thing seems really to have worried the Bushman regarding his stature and that was his size. Often I have been impressed by the extraordinary energy of revolt I have encountered in the spirit of many little men and have seen something of its exacting consequences in their own and other lives. Nor have I forgotten how disastrously this revolt can be orchestrated in the complexes and policies of whole races. When a prisoner of war of the Japanese, I was punished at times, I am certain, for no other reason than that I was often taller than those who had me in their power. Yet I have a suspicion that the Bushman's reaction to his smallness was of a different kind and brought about solely by his helplessness to repel the ruthless invasion of his country by men so much taller than he—men who seemed, in fact, so tall that he painted them on the rocks like giants! There was no doubt in the minds of those who had known him that his spirit was raw and vulnerable regarding his size. According to my mother's elder sister, our favourite aunt (who could count up to ten in Bushman and utter his formal greeting for our delight, although she invariably went dangerously purple in the process), it was fatal to remark on the Bushman's smallness in his presence. More, it was often perilous to show in one's bearing that one was aware of dealing with a person smaller than oneself.

Our old 'Suto hands strongly supported my aunt with their own colourful illustrations. They said they had always been warned never to show any surprise if they unexpectedly came upon a Bushman in the veld in case he took it to imply they could have seen him sooner had he not been so small. When, unexpectedly, one ran into a Bushman, the only wise thing

to do was promptly to blame oneself for the surprise and say, "Please do not look so offended. Do you really imagine a big person like you could hide without being seen? Why we saw you from a long way off and came straight here!" Immediately the fire in those shining eyes would die down, the golden chest expand enormously, and gracefully he would make one welcome. In fact, the oldest of the old Basutos once told me one could not do better than use the Bushman's own greeting, raising one's open right hand high above the head, and calling out in a loud voice, "*Tshjamm:* Good day! I saw you looming up afar and I am dying of hunger." Europeans so often use a diminutive for that which they want to endear. But with the Bushman this mechanism is reversed. The pitiless destructive forces sent against him by fate seemed to mock his proportions until he sought perhaps to appease his sense of insecurity with a wishful vision of a physical superlative he never possessed. So, in his rock paintings the Bushman depicts himself in battle as a giant against other giants to such a degree that, were it not for his *qhwai-xkhwe,* he would be hardly distinguishable from his towering enemies.

But, I was told, this little man before all else was a hunter. He kept no cattle, sheep or goats except in rare instances where he had been in prolonged contact with foreigners. He did not cultivate the land and therefore grew no food. Although everywhere his women and children dug the earth with their deft grubbing sticks for edible bulbs and roots and, in season, harvested veld and bush for berries and fruit, their lives and happiness depended mainly on the meat which he provided. He hunted in the first place with bow and arrow and spear. The heads of his arrows were dipped in a poison compounded from the grubs, roots and glands of the reptiles of the land, and he himself had such a respect for the properties of his own poison that he never went anywhere without the appropriate antidote in a little skin wallet tied securely to

his person. My grandfather and aunt said that he was so natural a botanist and so expert an organic chemist that he used different poisons on different animals, the strongest for the eland and the lion, and less powerful variants for the smaller game. His arrow points were made of flint or bone until he came to barter for iron with those about to become his enemies.

As an archer he was without equal. My grandfather said he could hit a moving buck at 150 yards, adding that he would not have liked to expose any part of himself in battle to a Bushman archer under 150 yards' range. But he not only hunted with bow and arrow. In the rivers and streams he constructed traps beautifully woven out of reeds and buttressed with young karree wood or *harde-kool* (the "hard-coal" wood my ancestors used in their nomadic smithy fires) and so caught basketfuls of our lovely golden bream, or fat olive-green barbel with its neck and huge head of bone and moustaches, greased and pointed like those of "a soldier of the Victorian Queen." The baskets at the end of the traps were like the eel-baskets of Europe but never so bleakly utilitarian. They were woven of alternate white and black plaits not because they were better that way but, my aunt said with great emphasis, because the Bushman wanted to make them pretty. Hard by, among the singing reeds, he dug pits with a cunningly covered spike in the centre in order to trap the nocturnal hippopotamus, whose sweet lard meant more to him than *foie gras* to any gourmet.

When my grandfather first crossed the Orange River, or the Great River as the Bushman and we who were born close always called it, there were still many of those big game-pits left. The trekkers, or covered-wagon pioneers of my people, kept patrols of horsemen scouting well ahead of the lumbering convoys to look out for these holes and, on a signal, someone would go to the front of the large span of oxen and

lifting the lead rope from the horns of the two guide-oxen, march carefully at their head. My grandfather often said he wished he had a dollar for every mile he had led his span by the head through the veld. Once in very early childhood, on one of our spring hunting and fishing excursions in the deep bed of the Great River, I saw some of those holes. The spikes in the centre and the top cover were gone, but I remember the sensation of wonder that came over me as one of the elder men said, "That's how he did it! That's how fat old tannie sea-cow found her way into the pot." "Old tannie sea-cow" was our endearing way of naming the hippopotamus, so called because it was there in the surf of the sea to welcome my people when they first landed in Africa. Between the sea and the Great River of my childhood lay hundreds of difficult miles, and it was impossible to find a place of water and reeds not associated in local legend and story with the sea-cow. However, long before this day of which I am speaking, "fat little old aunt sea-cow" had vanished like the Bushman who had so admired her waistline and so loved her lard.

In the tracks between water-holes and rivers the Bushman spread snares of tough home-made rope. The snares, according to my grandfather, were made of several kinds but the favourite was the classical hangman's noose. The noose was spread round the rim of a hole delicately covered over with grass and sand. Its end was tied to a tense spring made of the fiercely resilient stem of blue-bush wood. This stem was doubled over into the sand and so triggered that, however deft a buck's toe or crafty a leopard's paw, the merest touch would release the spring. The noose would instantly be jerked tight and the straightened stem hang the lively animal in the air by paw or throat.

So skilful and confident a hunter did the Bushman become that he did not hesitate to match himself in the open against the biggest and the thickest-skinned animals. For instance my

grandfather said he would provoke the male by darting in and out of a herd of elephant, or teasing the smaller crashes of rhinoceros, relying only on his knowledge of their ways and his own supple limbs for survival. He would contrive to do this until an angry elephant bull or some never very enlightened rhinoceros father would charge out to deal with him. Twisting and turning and shrieking a charm of magic words, the Bushman would flee until the animal was involved in a baffling pursuit. Then a companion could run up behind, unperceived, to attack the only place where such a rampant animal was vulnerable to Stone Age weapons. Smartly he would slice through the tendons above the heel. The animal now helpless on its haunches, the Bushman could close in to finish him off with spears and knives.

On top of his great daring and resource as a hunter, he was also subtle. That was a quality stressed by all those who had known him. He never seems to have attempted to accomplish by force what could be achieved by wit. The emphasis in his own natural spirit was on skill rather than violence. I can remember my grandfather saying with a note of admiration, if not envy, strangely alive on his pious Calvinist tongue, "Yes! he was clever, diabolically clever." The Bushman would, for example, use the lion as his hunting dog. When his normal methods of hunting failed him he would frighten the game in the direction of a hungry lion. He would let the lion kill and eat only enough to still its hunger but not enough to make it lazy. Then the Bushman would drive the lion off with smoke and fire and move in to eat the rest of the kill. In this way he would follow a favourite lion about from kill to kill and it was extraordinary how he and the lion came to respect their strange partnership. My grandfather said there was something uncanny about it. He remembered, too, his father telling him that when they first felt their way into the country across the Great River they found that all the lions