The Watcher And The Watched

John Heminway, published, 1982

Last night, sitting by the tent. Alan Root explained to me that when he dies he intends his body to be left on an African savannah. He will be repaying old debts to vultures, hyenas and porcupines; they, in turn, will be scratching off obligations to the smaller creatures—the beetles, bot flies and termites. His end, in short, will be many beginnings.

Morbidly utilitarian, this is the nub of a philosophy that inspires one of the most joyful and talented men of the African bushland. Alan is generally considered the finest wildlife filmmaker south of the Sahara—a superlative that some would not limit to Africa. They claim his films go right off the scales—laser beams in a field of bright lights. His *The Great Migration: Year of the Wildebeest*, nominated for an Academy Award and winner of a Peabody Award, may well be the greatest wildlife films made anywhere.

Even in Kenya, where praise for compatriots is rare, Alan's is given without reservation. He is the success story of the bush. Much to the pleasure and anguish of his friends, he remains the absolute eccentric, the clown, the daredevil, the mimic, the misanthrope, the life of the party, the irrepressible idealist of nature, the steadfast bearer of petty grudges, the critic. His boyish face, crowned by a tangle of blond hair, is incapable of veiling his moods. Anger must run its course before a smile can break through and when this happens, the light explodes from his thick glasses and his entire body coordinates to the farce, doubling up, gyrating. When he mimics the sound of a warthog being savaged by a leopard, he becomes one, scurrying, bent double; and when he flies an airplane between two doum palm tress, he performs the feat within an inch of his life. He seems to have no other thought than of the moment's activity. He will die for a sequence in a film, a joke, a game of tennis. In short, Alan is so consumed by living that every day requires some proof that he has cheated death.

The stars of Alan Root's films have almost always been animals, in defiance of the network notion that animal films need human supporting players, especially blond scientists or Sandhurst-trained game wardens. In most of Alan's films it's as though the human race does not exist. As a result, Alan has never broken ratings records, not that he cares particularly. What pleases him above all else is that his films, unadorned with the usual commercial props, are still commercial. The statistics show that very few people who turn on an Alan Root "special" can ever turn it off. He hypnotizes because his language is spare and un-pedantic, his stories controlled. His film technique avoids the usual pyro technics, yet many of his shots are so telling that film colleagues of his will often find themselves unable to resist a spontaneous round of applause.

Alan pretends to dismiss film technology—"I hate all the equipment. . . don't understand most of it. I certainly could not explain how film is developed." He avoids reading all reviews of his films, whether good or bad, and he refuses film awards.

Modesty, however, does not come easily to Alan. Indeed, he accepts compliments with delight, yet pretends to pay them little attention. "You are the greatest," a young admirer once told him. "I know," Alan replied. There was a pause. "Okay," he continued, "now what?"

Alan's history is curious because even at an early age he seemed to know what he wanted. According to his own account, nothing much happened in his life between 1936, the year of his birth in London, and 1943, when his parents brought him to Africa. Oh yes, there was the Battle of Britain and the odd bomb exploded near the Root family, but he was still in England and, as far as he remembers, he had not begun to live. His parents were from the East End of London and, like so many cockneys, they were better conditioned to life's ills than to its good fortunes. Alan's father was always on his guard for new opportunities, and in 1943, sensing that war-torn London would only become grimmer, he accepted the post of manager at a meatpacking factory in Kenya. The site of the plant was Athi River, twenty miles southeast of Nairobi.

Here at last there was no such color as London gray. A wide speckled plain surrounded Alan's house. To the east was Mount Lukenya, to the west the Kitengela River and to the south, on a clear day, the silver roof of Africa, Kilimanjaro.

His father knew virtually nothing about wildlife, so Alan was left to his own revelations. He began with boy-size animals, and with the help of local wa-Kamba tribesmen he built an aviary and learned how to trap birds, and then snakes. "I once shot two waxbills with my catapult," he recalls, "and I wept my eyes out for days." Two weeks later he had recovered from his tears and he was back collecting more specimens. "I don't know any good naturalist who didn't start off with a catapult. I think the 'killing stages' kids go through are pretty healthy . . . atavistic. It's when we keep doing it as adults—that's when it's rotten.

"The best I can say about my parents is that they were understanding." If Alan wanted to observe animals, they let him. When he started an exhibit at school, "Root's Reptiles," it was all right with them, and even when he returned after one of his bicycle expeditions with an account of pedaling into a pride of lions, they kept mum. You can't be mollycoddled in this world, they believed. Until recently Mrs. Root lived alone on the out skirts of Nairobi in a house that seemed held together with hairpins. If anything drew a smile to her face it was mention of Alan's renegade independence. " 'E really 'asn't changed much," she asserted with a big smile.

Of the few close friends Alan has had the closest was Nick Forbes-Watson. Son of a coffee grower from Thika, he and Alan spent nearly every weekend of their adolescence on wildlife quests. The higher a bird's nest in a tree, the more valuable

it seemed. On Sundays they returned home, battered from falls, their knap sacks filled with monitor lizards and sparrow hawk eggs. According to Alan, the two rarely talked because they knew each other so well. "I remember once we were sitting under a tree having lunch and we both heard a shrike call. Two beeps only. It was the male's note. He called again. And again. Neither of us said a word. And then, after a long delay, its mate finally answered. We both looked up. We didn't need to talk. I could see that Nick was as relieved as I."

Their undisciplined devotion to natural history was finally harnessed by Myles North. Wide-girthed, crimson from tropical sunshine, and forever dressed in white drill shorts and knee-length socks, Myles served as Thika's District Commissioner, the local representative of the Crown. Alan and Nick had stumbled upon him because of a reference in Great Northern, their favorite book. It concerned a group of English schoolboys who succeed in finding the rare Great Northern diver, and the dedication read: "To Myles W. North, my ornithological mentor." The boys made inquiries and found that the two Myles Norths were indeed one. They thereupon insinuated themselves into the ornithologist's life. "He was an old woman about collecting," Alan remembers today. "He made us skin, identify and label everything we found. Best of all, he turned me on to birdcalls. He was a master on the subject." The D.C.'s Morris van became the boys' command center. As they took turns driving, Myles sat enthroned in the rear of the vehicle, his huge Ampex tape recorder and rotary converter cradled on his lap. Every half-mile they stopped the van and listened for birdcalls, and when a sound excited Myles the boys set off into the bush, carrying the parabolic reflector, microphone and yards of cable. Alan never considered these assignments with the elderly colonialist drudgery. "I think I'm better in the bush now because of him. I can recognize sounds. An alarm call, for instance, tells me a lot. On many occasions I've been alerted to the presence of a leopard by a bird."

Cisticola cincreola was Alan's first major victory. To the undiscriminating bird watcher it was simply an "L.B.J."—"little brown job." Though not particularly rare, the breeding habits of this grass warbler were unknown. Myles had recorded its song on one occasion, but had never found its nest. He played the recording over and over to Alan and challenged him to find it. For two days Alan wandered the bush near Voi, a railroad siding halfway between Nairobi and Mombasa. Finally on the third day he heard a male singing. The warbler was perched on a stem of grass, and in little plucky flights it led Alan to the female. Her bill was filled with nest lining. Since grass warblers have the curious habit of lining their nests after they have laid their eggs, it was not difficult to follow her and to find the eggs. When he heard the news, Myles was so ecstatic that he broke open a bottle of wine. "That was a big deal in those days," Alan remembers. "I was sixteen."

Predictably, Alan loathed school. His four years at Kenya's Prince of Wales were imprisonment, except for the many hours he spent exploring the bush around the school. "I was given at least three beatings a week," he recalls. "But it made little difference." One of the prefects, Mr. Foster, took particular exception to Alan. "He

was often in charge of our table, and at the end of one meal, as he stood up to make an announcement, I slid a fork under the edge of his bowl of tapioca. When he pounded the table for quiet, his fist met the fork, and the pudding was rocketed onto his face. Foster never forgave me. He beat me for weeks."

On October 21, 1952, a state of emergency was declared throughout Kenya. The Kikuyu, in a frenzy of revenge aimed at Europeans and Kikuyu loyalists, began making clandestine attacks on remote farmsteads. Over the next five years about thirty whites and thousands of blacks were mutilated and killed.

Reacting as if this were another Battle of Britain, the European community had several infantry detachments dispatched from Britain and the entire white civilian population armed themselves. For four years no one sat down for dinner in Kenya without a revolver beside his plate.

Released from school, Alan was impressed into military service and sent off to the forests of the Aberdares, where several major Mau Mau gangs were at large. During his two years of military service, Alan learned much more about wildlife than about fugitives. In particular he spent many hours observing bongos, a rare antelope much talked about but little seen, and after his tour had ended he set out to trap one.

For years zoos had been clamoring for a bongo, but the catching methods of the time, usually involving dogs and bloodcurdling chases, had almost always ended with dead bongos. Alan invented a humane self-triggering enclosure, and within a month, he had collected the first bongo then in captivity. It was sent to the Cleveland Zoo and soon Alan was swamped with orders for more. Apart from the money, Alan's rationale for continuing this enterprise was to establish a breeding pool of bongos in zoos so that the wild bongo population would never again be jeopardized by encroachment. For the next five years, animal catching became Alan's hobby. He collected more than thirty bongos—the breeding stock that today supplies nearly all major zoos throughout the world. Just as he promised, one day he folded up the entire enterprise. "I'd caught," he explained, "all the bongos the world needed."

During his expeditions into the bush Alan had made an 8 mm film of snakes and charging rhinos. "It was just a home movie," he recalls, but it fell into the hands of John Pearson, an East African Airways pilot and would-be film maker who was so impressed by it that he summoned Alan to the Nairobi Museum and offered him £20 a month to film lily-trotters on Lake Naivasha. It seemed inconceivable to Alan that someone would actually pay him to sit beside beautiful Lake Naivasha. He accepted and a week later he was living in a shredded tent next to a school of hippos. He rose with the lily-trotters, fretted with their problems and watched the growth of their young.

In the late 1950’s few wildlife filmmakers in East Africa could live without the patronage of Armand and Michaela Denis. Commercial wildlife filming, then in its infancy, had been more or less launched by the Denises' highly popular British series called On Safari. It offered measured dosages of armchair travel, glamour (the

extravagantly coifed Michaela), cuddly pets and wildlife homilies, No one in England could have realized that Armand and Michaela were not in fact the sole camera operators since the film credits noted only their names. In reality they employed up to six wildlife filmmakers, the entire roster of cameramen living in East Africa at the time.

As soon as Armand Denis saw the lily-trotter film he hired Alan and assigned him straightaway to the remote expanse of grasslands where the concentrations of game were dizzying. With a sweep of the eye one could take in several hundred thousand wildebeest, prides of lions often more than thirty strong, creation and extinction balanced against one an other with eerie logic.

Alan was one of the first professional cameramen to film in the Serengeti; within a few weeks he had already exposed the first footage ever of a leopard hauling a carcass into a tree and a zebra giving birth. "In many ways it was the easiest filming I'd ever done-- merely a question of pointing the camera in the right direction."

Alan's work with the Denises was interrupted one day by a zebra-striped Dornier aircraft that circled the Serengeti headquarters and landed next to the game warden's house. The plane was piloted by Bernhard and Michael Grzimek, a father and son team from Frankfurt, Germany. They wanted to record the movements of the herds of wildebeest and zebra over the course of a year, in hopes that the legal boundaries of the park would one day contain their migration. The first order of business was to hire a cameraman. Did the game warden happen to know one? Myles Turner, a man of fierce loyalties, made it clear that they could do no better than Alan Root, who happened to be filming nearby. Before Alan had even heard of the arrangement, Myles had successfully negotiated his contract.

The film they made with Alan was called Serengeti Shall Not Die. Of the few collaborations Alan has made, he can remember none so pleasant. He and Michael were much alike, not only in age, but in their approach to the game. They both were curious about the complex set of debts and promises that connect predators and prey; they both were consumed by the extravagance of life on these plains; and both of them were comics and daredevils.

The fun came to an end one day when Michael flying alone, struck a vulture in midflight. With the ailerons and the flaps jammed, the plane went into a dive. Michael was buried on the lip of the Ngorongoro Crater and the epitaph on his gravestone is simple: " Michael Grzimek—12 4.1934 to 10.1.I959. He gave all he possessed for the wild animals of Africa, including his life."

Nick Forbes-Watson had died tragically a few years before, Armand Denis would have only a handful of years to live, John Pearson would be shot by a trigger-happy game guard and so many of Alan's friends, particularly the game wardens of East Africa, would meet similar, usually violent ends. For Alan, death had begun to assume a place in life.

In 1961 Alan married Joan Thorpe, the daughter of a coffee planter and herself a safari guide. Alan had noticed her on several occasions but had never been able to cut through her shyness until one day he heard she was bringing up a small orphaned elephant. Elephants under six months are usually impossible to raise. Joan had been more successful than most people, and Alan, in his own words, "liked winners."

A master of the deadly pun, Alan recalls: "Before we were married, she wore a monocle and so did I. Together we made quite a spectacle." On the first night of their honeymoon, for instance, Joan was stung by a scorpion. They were camped next to the Tsavo River Bridge, where in 1898, the rail-laying crew had been terrorized by two man-eating lions. The Roots sat up until dawn, he comforting her, both listening to the howl of the passing trains and to a lion, perhaps a descendant of the man-eaters, roaring nearby. It was the beginning of an accident-prone but very happy partnership. "I don't know what I'd do without Joan," Alan admits today. "I'd probably have to marry three women at the same time."

A month after they were married Alan was invited to join Douglas Botting and Anthony Smith, two BBC producers, on a hydrogen balloon expedition across East Africa, When Alan asked Armand Denis for a leave of absence to help out the two Englishmen, Denis fired him on the spot. "It was a bit rough for Joan," Alan admits today. "She obviously thought she had backed a loser."

The balloon was called Jambo, and every launching led to an adventure. From the island of Zanzibar they crossed to the mainland and floated across much of Tanzania, with an unforgettable drift over Alan's beloved Serengeti. Their last ascent was an exhibition for a large crowd of aviation buffs at the Nairobi Airport. Egged on by the pretty girls, the balloonists unwisely lifted off in a high wind. To avoid an RAF squadron just ahead they had to throw out most of their ballast in the first few minutes of flight and by the time they were over the Ngong Hills they had little left and were virtually out of control. They hit the peaks three times and on the third impact Alan was pitched forward from the basket, his head smashing against a stone, then hauled back in as the balloon climbed to ten thousand feet. At this altitude the balloon leveled off and then started to descend, faster and faster. The three balloonists frantically heaved out the remaining ballast, then their lunch, the first-aid kit and finally their personal belongings. They were left with only the precious camera equipment, and just as Alan was throwing out film, battery, a telephoto lens, the basket smashed through a thorn tree and hit the ground, Alan looked around. No one was dead. The balloon ride had been a success.

Joan need not have worried that she had backed a loser. *Serengeti Shall Not Die* won an Academy Award, and within the small fraternity of East African filmmakers Alan had begun to gain a powerful reputation. In 1962 he was hired by a small British film company just embarked on a wildlife series called "Survival." Anglia Television, flushed with success after completion of a half-hour film on the animals of Hyde Park, had determined to go farther afield, this time into Uganda. Aubrey Buxton, the managing director, was camped with his wife on Lake Edward and had heard from

the game warden that Alan Root was located somewhere on the far bank of the Rutshuru River. The bridge was down because of floods, and Buxton shouted across the river to Alan, offering him a job.

Except for one hiatus, Alan has been in league with Survival ever since. His first years of association call to mind a film-making sausage factory; a one-hour production on the Karamajong cattle raiders in northern Uganda, a half-hour film on Lake Rudolf (now Lake Turkana), another on the plight of twenty thousand young flamingos encased in dried soda at Lake Magadi, gorillas in Rwanda, volcanoes in the Congo, sunbirds on Mount Kenya, white rhinos in Uganda, And just when the Roots seemed to be too confined by Africa, Buxton sent them to Australia, New Guinea, the Galapagos and South America. *Voyage to the Enchanted Isles*, Alan and Joan's Galapagos film, narrated by Prince Philip, would be the first one-hour special Survival would sell in the United States and it would pave the way for future network sales.

When Alan and Joan returned to Africa they decided they wanted a home. Until now they had lived mostly in tents, and their growing collection of pets needed a base. Their friends insisted that a land purchase in Kenya now would be insane. The country had recently gained independence and the ex-leader of the Mau Mau movement, Jomo Kenyata, had been elected the country's first president a few months after his release from prison. Settlers, sure that bloodshed would follow independence were collecting their belongings and abandoning the farms and ranches they had once coaxed from the bush.

Joan and Alan wanted to live nowhere else but Africa. (“If Kenya packed up we'd move to Tanzania.") They bought an eighty-eight-acre farm from a despondent settler. Located on the shore of Lake Naivasha, just across from where Alan had made his first wildlife film, the house was (and is) a housewife’s nightmare. The kitchen was sited far from the house, the interior rooms were dreary and the plumbing worked only on holidays-- not that the Roots cared. They liked the house because it was framed by a large veranda for the birds, with plenty of space to build cages for other pets. Best of all, there was enough land for an airstrip.

Alan had just learned to fly. He soloed after eight hours of instruction, discovered he preferred flying without his instructor and decided not to return to Nairobi Airport. Henceforth he clocked a total of four hundred illegal hours in his Piper Colt before returning to complete the flying course. "I didn’t have a clue what I was doing, particularly when I flew through clouds. Still, I figured it was a hell of an imposition forcing you to get a license just to protect you and your wife’s life.”

In the late sixties, Alan resigned from Survival to make his own films. Aubrey Buxton tried to discourage him by arguing that the history of one-man production houses was a story of failure. No cameraman could conceive, film, edit, complete and sell his own productions. Films were a corporate effort, after all, and Alan needed the manpower, facilities and connections of Survival.

The argument was lost on Alan. He set to work immediately on two simple notions. One was a story of a baobab tree, the other a study of a freshwater spring. Each ecosystem, on the surface deceptively plain, was composed of complex relationships-- enemies that needed each other, kinsmen that ate each other. This world within a tree, or beneath the glass surface of a spring, would be shown to be stunning, wise and sometimes familiar.

Alan immediately presold his two ideas to the BBC, Survival's competition, for British distribution, but the Beeb's investment was only enough to cover the costs of the film stock. For the next two years the Roots bobbed in and out of debt, financing their lonely work with the sale of bongos to zoos.

For someone not so confident as Alan this kind of filming could have been numbingly boring. Days passed without exposing a foot of film, equipment broke miles from repair facilities and wildlife behavior that seemed certain to occur simply never happened. Alan and Joan seem immune to these kinds of frustrations. For days the two can live in almost total silence, conversations conducted either in whispers or arm codes. They let themselves be swallowed by the bush, their human presence overshadowed by a kind of animal intuition. Alan never committed scenario to paper and for long periods of time, Joan admits, she was never sure where the film was going. But Alan's aim was deadly accurate. The Mzima Springs film took one year to work; the baobab required only five months.

The Mysterious Spring: Africa's Mzima is about the chain of life initiated by hippos. Their protein-rich waste feeds schools of labio fish, which in turn are preyed upon by the crocodiles-- an alliance of needs between animals who otherwise share little in common. The film offered bit parts for spotted-necked otters, freshwater crabs, pythons, snake birds, finfoots. damsel flies, vervet monkeys and turtles, each living around the springs in a constant state of détente.

Alan tried filming the underwater sequences of the hippos and crocs through a cage but he found it much too cumbersome. By accident he discovered that swimming freely was not as dangerous as it seemed. "The first time I went in, Alan recalls, I was washing my goggles in the shallows. That attracted the crocs and one came at me full-speed ahead. At that moment I fell into the water and I suppose my splash surprised it. I decided the danger to man was only when his body showed above the surface or when he stood in the shallows like other animals. So I swam right at the croc and it chickened out and turned tail." Alan's experiment yielded the most dramatic shots in the film— moon-walking hippos, and crocodiles spinning to pry flesh off the carcass of an impala. Often Alan was close enough to reach out and touch a hippo.

Of the two films, *Secrets of the African Baobab* is Alan's favorite. This remarkable "upside-down" tree can survive for as long as two thousand years, serving as a tenement for scores of different species, generation after generation.

One of the baobab's most interesting residents is the red- billed hornbill. For six weeks every year the female seals herself into a crevice to raise her family. Until the making of the film no one knew for sure what went on behind the mud masonry. Alan removed the back of a nest, replacing it with a wall of Plexiglas, a clear one when he was filming, opaque otherwise. Somehow the bird tolerated this disturbance. Undauntedly she laid five eggs, while her mate, doomed not to see her for the period of her confinement, fed her geckos, berries and frogs through a narrow slit in the hard mud. Prompted by the chirping of his just-hatched brood, the male's feeding pace soon became a frenzy. At last, when the chicks were too large for comfort, the female pecked her way out. As soon as she was gone the nestlings methodically re-plastered the hole, committed to the interior darkness until their biological clocks told them it was time to depart.

Each left the nest at the exact interval it was hatched from the

egg. The final scene of this extraordinary story was a subtle masterstroke of mood—the father bringing a damselfly to the nest, only to discover that his children have flown away.

Alan's larger story soon becomes apparent: Baobabs, hornbills and geckos need each other. Individual deaths are nature's method of guaranteeing the survival of the whole. When a baobab is shredded into fiber by an elephant, or a hornbill egg devoured by a bushbaby, neither baobabs nor hornbills arc doomed. In fact they prosper. "They go on. The whole flamboyant, chaotic spectacle actually works and works well, year after year," the commentary reads. "A seed once grown by a defunct baobab will, in several hundred years, be a giant of the plains. There will be no end to death, no final season."

Alan began editing the two films in the farmhouse at Naivasha, his only consultants apart from Joan being their colobus monkey and striped hyena. The work was completed in England at the BBC, and as soon as his British sale had been finalized, Alan flew to New York to sell the American rights, against everyone's advice. The Kenya bumpkin would fall easy prey to the New York and Hollywood sharks, he was cautioned. What actually happened revealed one of Alan's unexpected talents.

Alan states, "Most people who sell their films approach the producers with only an idea. That's how they get stung. The producers tell them to change their scripts and reduce their salaries. I, on the other hand, had a completed film." He was anything but an innocent when he got down to negotiations. After the first screening of his films in New York, a producer made him an offer over lunch in an elegant restaurant. "The figures were pretty mind-boggling," he remembers. "More money than I had ever seen in my lifetime. But I turned it down. It wouldn't have made much sense if I sold everything in my first day in New York. I'd have learned nothing." A few days later in Washington, the National Geographic made an even better offer. He also turned it down. (The president, Mel Payne, complained: "I don't understand why such a young man wants so much money.") In Hollywood Alan was wooed by David Wolper but he again refused to make a deal. At heart, the issue was not just money.

Alan's preconditions to a sale were that no major changes to the film would be made. "One guy wanted to put in some shark footage to make Mzima look more dangerous. Somebody else was keen to have Joan and me playing with a lot of snakes, and a third guy wanted to get rid of all the dung in the Mzima film. I just said to them, 'No deal.' "

Alan wanted to consider all his options back in Africa. On his way home he stopped in England and said hello to his old employer, Aubrey Buxton. At the time, Buxton's company was looking for natural history specials to prime its newly created American sales force. Of all the people Alan had met during the last month he was still most comfortable with Aubrey. "I told him that if they could top all the other offers and promise not to butcher the stories, Survival could have the two films." Aubrey had no objections to the stories as they stood, and in the time-honored British midday salute, the two sealed the deal with a glass of Tio Pepe and a handshake.

Before returning home, Alan was invited by his ballooning friend, Anthony Smith, to test the latest toy in the field of wing less aircraft. It was a hot-air balloon—far less dangerous and expensive than the hydrogen version he and Tony had flown over Africa. Alan made his first ascension from a village green in Hampshire: "As we lifted off I created a camera shot by cupping my hands around my eyes, limiting their field of vision as if they were a lens. I began by focusing on a daisy growing next to the basket. As we began our climb 1 could see people's legs, then all the village green. Pretty soon the entire village came into view and, after that, all of England. Before we landed I knew I needed a balloon for filming."

The difference between humdrum and interesting camerawork is often a matter of perspectives. Alan is always trying to find the novel angle, not just to be arresting, but also to heighten the truth of the action. To film a herd of animals moving across a plain by holding the camera at eye level would have abused all the magical opportunities of Africa. Instead, Alan would bury the camera in their path to film their progress from a snake's point of view. In Alan's films, flowers are not just in bloom; they begin as petals and bloom before one's eyes. Similarly a bird's nest does not just appear; it is built on the screen, twig by twig, in a mere thirty seconds. The technology of this process is known as time-lapse photography, and it is a hallmark of Alan's films. Hot-air ballooning would add still another startling perspective to his Africa. It would also be the most hair-raising fun he had had in a long while.

Alan was to obtain the first hot-air balloon license ever is sued in black Africa. His training period at Naivasha had not been all that easy: On several occasions he had performed "underwater" flying in the lake, once he had snagged around the telephone lines beside a road and on another occasion he had even "gift-wrapped" a thorn tree.

By now Alan was embarked on a new filming project—an ambitious story about the million wildebeest of the Serengeti. Every year nearly a quarter of a million are born and a quarter of a million die, and Alan, usually so preoccupied with miniature

stories, was overwhelmed by the size of this sacrifice. How do you show such a herd on the screen? Naturally, with a balloon. An airplane is too fast and a helicopter too noisy. In the finished film the one balloon shot—it had been haunting Alan for so long—is so subtly edited that it nearly goes unnoticed: a half- million wildebeest grazing in the distance, and in the foreground, three vultures circling, watching for death. The shot lasts for only twenty seconds on the screen; it had cost the Roots a week of work.

The film was made in two and a half years. It would have taken far longer had it not been for Alan's secondhand Cessna 182. In the early mornings, he and Joan reconnoitered from the air and when they saw the herd, for example, about to cross a river, they would make an emergency landing as close as safety (Alan's idea of safety) permitted and then, clutching all their film gear, scramble on foot toward the bleating sounds of the herd. "It wasn't unusual to find that we were running alongside a few lions similarly attracted to the sound." One time when they re turned from one such foot safari they discovered that the airplane had been speared by poachers. They patched the holes but failed to note that the battery cables had been damaged. "For weeks we did not know there were sparks flying in all directions from just behind our seats," remembers Joan.

"*The Year of the Wildebeest*"—"Brave Gnu World," as Alan liked to call it—appeared on CBS in May 1975 and was rerun by NBC in July 1976. Almost all of Alan's film colleagues consider it his finest film. Throughout, there is pounding energy, hammered onto the screen by the wildebeests' hooves, heightened by the terse, sometimes ironic script. By the film's end one is cowed by the wisdom of death. The spare language is often so good it draws attention to itself:

"The white-bearded gnu—an animal apparently designed by a committee and assembled from spare parts."

"Whenever there is a creature behaving strangely on the plains there are always other animals alert to wonder why."

“The wildebeest haven't changed In two million years. They haven't needed to; for, though they may choose some bizarre ways to die, they have found a fantastically successful way to live."

"There is a saying in Africa that somewhere there is a place where the grass meets the sky, and the name of that place is 'the end.' "

In Kenya, a country not noted for its verbal badinage. Alan’s plays on words have become passwords to his life. His pet aardvark is named Million. Why? Because "Aardvark a million miles for one of your smiles!" On the front of his car the Range Rover lettering has been rearranged to read "Hang Over." When asked by a Walt Disney producer if he liked the name of their new film about bongos, *The Biggest Bongo in the World*, he was quite abusive. "Awful." he said. They challenged him to come up with a better one and in a second he solved their dilemma; "Last Bongo in Paris." On another occasion, he was drinking with his friend. Dr. Mary Leakey, who

was pondering what to name her exhaustive monograph on the stone tool cultures of the Olduvai Gorge. Alan advised her to call it: "I Dig Dirty Old Men."

Ever since Alan had learned to fly a balloon, nothing gave him greater pleasure than offering his friends joyrides: a dawn departure from the lawn in front of the house to the strains of "Up, Up and Away," a climb into clouds, a descent onto the roof of a neighbor's house to wake its occupants with a few bars of "Born Free," out across the lake to surprise a sleeping herd of hippos, up again to search for plains game and to open a bottle of champagne, and a finger-barking landing in an onion field just as the rescue crew, driving a Land Rover, sped into sight. These flights were so successful that Alan decided to go public with lighter-than-air travel. For years he and Richard Leakey had been partners in a photographic safari company, and when it was disbanded in 1976 because of personal differences, he formed another partnership with the leading hotelier of the country to take tourists across the Masai Mara Game Reserve in his balloon. "The fun was getting Balloon Safaris going—convincing the local aviation authorities that it was okay to have regular charter flights to a destination never certain until you got there."

Looming above the business enterprise was an even greater challenge. Kilimanjaro, at 19,340 feet, was the highest point in Africa; ergo, ballooning over the peak would represent the highest physical achievement in Africa, the ultimate seduction. Most people could have tossed aside this challenge but Alan presumably was taunted every time he saw the silver dome floating above late-afternoon clouds. By now he was a living reminder of other such dares. The index finger on his right hand was missing because of an indiscretion with a puff adder. A portion of his right buttock had been deeded to a leopard in the Serengeti, and most of the cartilage in his right knee was missing because he had once tried to set a Kenya record for motorcycle jumps. Now whenever he entered the Nairobi Hospital he was greeted as an old friend.

None of Alan's friends was terribly surprised to hear that he was preparing to be the first to balloon over the top of Kilimanjaro. Now that the wildebeest film was finished Alan had given himself four months before his next production. He gathered together some friends who were eager to serve as the ground crew and readied his balloon, Lengai, for the assault. From the lower slopes of the mountain, Alan calculated he would have to head away from the peak because of the winds, and then at about 24,000 feet, hope to catch an alternating wind that would carry him over the top. There the winds would be treacherous and the air nearly one-quarter its density at sea level.

The "shakedown" was spent test-flying the equipment, purchasing special gear and dickering with the meteorological service. One day the flight was off, another on, and much of Nairobi joined in speculating whether or not the madman would make it. In a society that warmly takes heart from others' misfortunes and rarely admits to heroes, Alan's apparent death wish had captured the imagination.

On the morning of March 25, 1976, the ground crew inflated the balloon on a farm to the west of the mountain. The clouds were down to the ground and nobody was laughing. Until the last moment there had been a question whether or not Joan could accompany Alan. It was generally agreed because of the load factor only one passenger could make the ascent. Joan had not said a word but it was clear that she would gladly have amputated an arm to meet the required weight. By now Alan was inside the basket firing the burner. He looked out at her. “You ready" he asked, seconds before the balloon lifted off.

For the first half-hour of the flight Alan and Joan flew through dense cloud, never certain where they were bound. Just before they saw sunlight the flame on the burner blew out and for a frightening second Alan fumbled with matches to relight it.

Alan has coined an expression, "The Root Effect." to describe the illusion of the sides of the basket lowering, the higher the balloon climbs. At five thousand feet the basket's walls are at waist level, but at twenty thousand feet they seem little higher than one's ankles. Now as the balloon drifted over the top of Mawenzi Joan was behaving strangely. For a second Alan considered "The Root Effect," She was uncharacteristically snappy and clumsy. "What's the mater?" Alan asked. "Nothing." She shouted back. Suddenly he noticed the tube from her oxygen supply had gotten fouled. As fast as he could he reconnected it and soon she was her placid self.

Borne by a friendly monsoon, and with hardly a ripple, the basket sailed across the roof of Africa, its two occupants Phineas Foggs of a new sort. The altimeter registered 24,000 feet and directly below was the broken cone of Kilimanjaro- Old glaciers and the remains of last season's snows lay in pockets along the rims. Alan looked for climbers, but at nine on a March morning the mountain was deserted. The mountain and the sky made the balloon seem very small. When he and Joan had successfully flown over Kilimanjaro, they were forced to make a landing in then-hostile Tanzania. Minutes after their moment of triumph, both Roots were arrested as "astronaut spies.”

Of all Alan's films, the one-hour special about his balloon exploits seems the most flawed, possibly because he was dealing with humans (particularly himself) instead of animals. The humor that abounds in his life seemed out of context in the film, and at times the commentary runs to unmitigated conceit: “Flying a balloon takes a bit of getting used to—but Alan Root is one of those naturally well-coordinated people who gets the hang of this sort of thing very quickly. . . ." On television *Balloon Safari*, seemed an uneven pastiche, but when it is shown at the farmhouse on Lake Naivasha it is colorful and very funny. It seems to be an indulgence, an amusement for his friends. "Precisely," Alan admits today. "It's a home movie."

Survival was now clamoring for something bigger than ever before. "How about," one of the producers suggested, "taking all the best of Alan's films, shoot an interconnecting story about the Roots' weird life style and their damned balloon, and string the whole lot into a 35 mm film for movie houses across America?" A few

months later the Roots were host to a film crew. And three weeks later the filming came to a tragic halt.

The crew had been at Mzima Springs for nearly two weeks, filming Alan and Joan underwater with the crocs and hippos. On one of the last days of the shoot, in murky waters, a second-ranked bull hippo charged. Joan was hit first. The impact was a colossal thud that Alan later likened to the blow of an "E-type marshmallow." The hippo's canines pierced her facemask within a millimeter of her right eye and she was thrown into the shallows, shaken but unscathed. Next, the hippo turned on Alan. It first took a bite from his bottom, missing flesh but making two gashes across his swim trunks. Then with Alan's right leg in its mouth, it shook him, like a pillow, its canines scissoring up and down. Soon the water was stilled. Feeling only numbness in his leg, Alan reached down to see if he was okay. What was once his calf was now jelly. Martin Bell, the cameraman, put Alan in a hammerlock and swam him to shore before the crocs had time to investigate the blood. There he was bandaged by an Italian doctor, a member of a party of Italian tourists who had watched the attack as, surely, their Roman ancestors had once gawked at Christians in the Coliseum. "In less than three hours," Alan later wrote, "I was in the familiar homely surroundings of the casualty ward of the Nairobi Hospital."

Luckily, the hippo's canines had missed all tendons, nerves and arteries. Only the smaller of the two calf bones, the fibula, was broken. Still, the hole made through the soft part of his leg was large enough to pass a Coke bottle. Gangrene set in almost immediately, as the doctors frantically tried to match an anti biotic with the infection generated by all the organic material that had passed from the hippo's mouth into Alan's leg. In a newsletter to his friends he claimed he "became so odiferous that even some of my best friends told me. In fact, all my best friends told me. I had some spectacular fevers—boy! I have had the sheets changed before when I was sweating [presumably during his regular bouts with malaria], but never the mattress! And in between the sweats I needed an electric blanket to keep warm. Three days, seventeen pints of saline, eight pints of blood, many millions of units of intravenous penicillin and several cups of tea later I was declared okay and since then I have been on the mend." For a year afterward, particles of the hippo's meal fell from the wound, offering Alan consoling proof of his brotherhood with the would-be killer.

Nearly a year had been wasted. Hollywood had seduced both Survival and Alan and now the project was shelved. As soon as he could run, Alan, predictably, disappeared from view. He was at work on an idea that had been brewing ever since he was a child—the story of termite mounds, that bizarre architectural feature of almost all sub-Saharan Africa. Survival's American sales force was alarmed ("Selling a film about bugs—you gotta be kidding!"), but Alan paid little attention and in the autumn of 1977 the film was finished. In the face of continuing American distress he flew to New York and ad-libbed the narration as he rolled a rough cut of the film for would-be buyers at NBC. In a raw but effective narration, Alan characterized termites not

just as "bugs" but creatures possessed of a curious collective wisdom. As soon as the lights went on at the end of the film, a completely captivated NBC purchased the film.

Castles of Clay is artistically as majestic as *The Year of the Wildebeest.* In addition it is suffused with mystery—worlds shrouded from man's view, lives within lives. One usually acerbic critic from the Manchester Guardian went beyond the usual praise: "My interest in the termite film is finite. Nevertheless I believe 'Castles of Clay' ... is the finest natural history film ever seen. And because even that seems qualified praise, I will put it among the finest films I have ever seen full stop."

Here is the quintessential Root film: Beneath an apparently inanimate object is concealed a command headquarters for a highly sophisticated form of life. One is tempted to conclude that beside termites, humans are as dull as river mud.

In preparation for the film, Alan had discarded most of the

existing literature on the subject. Eugene Marais's *Soul of the White Ant*, written some forty years ago and long held to be the final word on the subject, received an immediate Root broadside ("I don't need to be taught how to think by a South African, and anyway he's wrong"). Alan's only consultant was a Kenyan scientist who for the last three years had been cutting open termite mounds and examining the societies within. But many of the insights in the film are exclusively Alan's and, in several instances, the film breaks new ground with material unknown to science.

Alan had been warned repeatedly that opening the mound to film floodlights would immediately stimulate unnatural termite behavior. In effect, the insects would mount into defensive positions as if in a state of war. All these warnings Alan found to be true, so he improvised. He removed portions of the mound, brought them to a dark place in the farmhouse and allowed the termites to settle for a few days. Just as he had expected, they resumed normal behavior.

The source of all sentient life within the mound is the queen termite. "Four inches long, and as thick as a man's thumb, this grotesque creature looms over the workers that attend her. Beside their queen, the workers look like a ground crew handling a half-inflated airship." A vast egg-laying machine, every day she produces thirty thousand new termites. The workers feed her, remove her excrement, carry off her eggs and during this process, although she cannot move one inch without the assistance of thousands of bearers, she is able to rule her vast empire. Her system of communication is far more bizarre than the telephone: "The saliva of each termite contains a precise mixture of chemicals, a mixture that is determined by the condition of the mound and the 'needs' of the society. So the information is passed from mouth to mouth through the colony, and when the queen is fed she receives a chemical cocktail that gives her a detailed report on the state of her nation."

Sorcery does not end here. Consider how the termites feed themselves: They have their own gardens—mushroom gardens, to be exact. Air conditioning? Yes, they

believe in that too. By opening and closing the ventilation chimneys on the top of the mound, and by descending through shafts 150 feet deep, they collect water to moisten the sides of their chambers, so that the interior temperature, year to year, night to day, varies no more than one degree from 85 degrees Fahrenheit. Romance? That too. The alates, youngsters, one day destined to become kings and queens, are initiated into their commanding roles with a nuptial flight so unspeakably beautiful that, in the film, narration and music discreetly cease. Their diaphanous wings beating against blackness, they must fly, mate, shed their wings and survive a cruel night before they can inherit the responsibility of empire. "These new creatures are princes and princesses who, like Cinderella, have one magical night before returning to darkness and drudgery,"

When *Castles of Clay* had its debut on British and American television, I was with Alan and Joan, a hundred miles from a telephone, camped on the banks of Kenya's Tana River, filming a pair of violet-backed sunbirds nesting, for protection, next to a wasp's nest. A new film was under way, a need that must yearly be satisfied if Alan is to restore to Africa what he has enjoyed from it.

There are those who say Alan could do more to raise money for the animals he loves so much. He disagrees. "I'm not good at standing up and shouting about conservation. Basically I don't believe in it—neither all the money nor all the good will in the world can save a species. They're all doomed, ultimately. Every species. I'm just good at making films about how it was."

It is a measure of Alan's artistry that, in the face of a dubious future for the only world he cares about, he is always able to retain the light touch. Hundreds of miles from the mailbox that was filling with congratulatory cables, I watched him and Joan transfixed by the violet-backed sunbird, whispering in monotones, like people at the ballet. Whenever the sunbird stood on its perch, its wings beating a hundred times faster than a heartbeat, Alan squeezed the shutter of his camera.

Last night, by the tent, Alan was explaining how in nature nothing is ever wasted—neither baobab trees, nor wildebeests nor termite mounds. Even humans, he believes, should have a purpose other than mere existence—one they may never yet have considered. Alan plans to realize his by leaving his body to the savannah. There it will be returned to Africa and used again and again.

And so now I study first Alan and then the sunbird. Maybe someday, I think, there will be another such beauty, brilliantly colored, its wings just a blur.

The watched and the watcher will have become one.