



HarperCollins e-books



Zamba

Ralph Helfer

Zamba

The True Story of the Greatest Lion That Ever Lived

Ralph Helfer

 HarperCollins e-books

Dedicated

to

Mom, Dad, and my sister Sally Ann

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Preface

The writing of *Zamba* has been both an emotional and a rewarding experience. It allowed me to relive eighteen years of my life with a true and loyal friend.

Living with an African lion, bringing him into my world and teaching him to be patient and understanding with us humans, was an in-depth study of the potential of human-animal relationships. But what was more important was how Zamba taught me his way of life and allowed me to enter into his domain and share the unique God-given wonders offered to him.

I realize now more than ever before that animals are indeed perfect. As a result of living by nature's law, they live a life as God intended. We humans, unlike animals, have the power of choice and therefore have the ability to go against nature and do whatever we desire. Unfortunately our choices are not always the right ones.

Writing about living with a lion brought back all the grand moments we shared. As I wrote, I felt as if each event was actually happening one more time, and I trembled with excitement, just as before. I smiled, even laughed aloud when I remembered a cherished occasion. But there were hard times, too, and when I recalled the tender moments, my tears flowed, and I had to close the book until the sadness was not too much to bear.

Now, please settle back, open your hearts, and share my life with Zamba, the greatest lion that ever lived.

I have spent my life living and working peacefully with animals. But one of my most formative learning experiences was an incident that ended with me in the hospital.

I was in my late teens. I was doing stunts and assisting other trainers with their animals, and I was offered a job as a stuntman for a Hollywood studio. They asked that I work an adult male lion on a pedestal, just as is done in the circus. They wanted him to snarl and swipe at me a few times.

I told them I'd be happy to, but for one problem: I had no lion. I said thanks anyhow and hung up.

Later that day the studio called again. They said that they'd found a lion. The man who owned him would be out of town for the day of the shoot, but he knew of me and felt I could do the stunt. He said that the lion, who was called Rex, was old and would respond to certain basic commands. The handler who'd be bringing Rex to the shoot could tell me everything I needed to know.

I could hardly contain my excitement. I had been obsessed with lions since childhood, and I held them in the highest esteem, more than any other creature. To me they represented the best that nature had to offer. Their regal attitude, proud stance, strength, and dignity always made me feel I was in the presence of royalty, and I felt a real spiritual connection to them—I felt called to work with them.

I have always been convinced that very real communication between humans and animals is possible, and I was sure that working with a lion was my own key to that interaction. But at that time in my career I hadn't yet set foot in an arena with any animal, let alone with a lion. And this job wasn't the way I had imagined my first solo interaction with a lion would be. I knew that this animal had been "fear trained," and working with an animal that had been tamed with cruelty and violence went against all my principles. I also realized that it had the potential to be very, very dangerous.

In spite of my reservations, the studio made it hard to refuse the job. They said I was just the right size, and they offered me a good deal of money. Times were rough. I had acquired a number of small animals—raccoons, opossums, kinkajous, a red-tailed hawk, and a small mountain lion—and my expenses had escalated. I reasoned with my conscience: after all, I hadn't had anything to do with the lion's training, and I certainly wouldn't be hurting him. In fact, it could be the other way around. I accepted.

The hard part was telling my girlfriend.

“Ralph, you’re an idiot! This is an incredibly stupid thing to do. You don’t know the lion, and he’s never met you. You can’t get instructions from some guy five minutes before you go into the ring to work a lion.”

“The trainer said it won’t be a problem, and I really need the money.”

“We don’t need it that badly. You’re going to get yourself killed.”

Sweet, athletic Laura had helped me build my small collection of animals. We argued for hours until she finally gave up on me.

“Go ahead—kill yourself. Enjoy your short career.”

In my heart, I knew she was right. But I needed the money, and I wanted to prove to myself that I could do it. Although I didn’t agree with the methods of trainers who used fear, I had seen what they did and how they did it, and I felt I could mimic their commands. I didn’t need to abuse the animal—I was just going to be following the directions I was given, issuing commands that the owner had trained the lion to respond to years before. The handler who accompanied the lion would tell me what to do and how to do it, and I’d be home by lunch.

On the day of the shoot, when I arrived at the studio I noticed a pickup truck and trailer parked near the entrance to the big soundstage. Actually, it wasn’t the pickup I noticed so much as the enormous African lion pacing in a large portable cage nearby, jaws dripping with saliva. A man dressed in a pair of well-worn jeans, a striped Western shirt, cowboy boots, and a broad-brimmed hat stood near the cage. The telltale string coming out of his shirt pocket meant he was carrying a small bag of “Bullderm” chewing tobacco.

I introduced myself and asked how the lion was feeling. The handler cocked his hat back on his balding head and said, “Well, okay, I guess.”

“You guess?” I questioned.

“Well, yeah, a bit restless, but…” He hesitated. “He’s okay.”

A squirt of tobacco juice landed on the ground near me. “When do these people pay us?” he asked.

I’d seen this type of guy hanging around the barns at some of the animal compounds. He was a mess of uncouth habits and flaunted his couldn’t-care-less attitude.

“I think they’ll pay by check in about a week,” I said.

Another stream of spit hit the dirt.

I saw the situation for what it was. This fellow needed money, and he’d let me work the lion—even if it was unsafe—just to get it. I felt a strange sensation in my stomach. But I didn’t back out. In the next two minutes he told me all that he knew about Rex, which was how to get him to sit on the pedestal, cuff at me with his paw, and snarl.

“That’s it,” he said.

“That’s it?”

“That’s it—no big deal.”

“Has he ever been handled?”

“You mean touched?”

I nodded yes.

“Are you crazy? He’d kill you!”

My opinion of this guy sank even lower—and my nerves weren’t improving.

“Okay, kid, we’re ready for you.” A man spoke from the slightly open door of the soundstage.

There were about thirty-five people on the set. Assistant directors, set decorators, electricians, carpenters, script girl—it’s always amazing to me how many people it takes behind the camera to make a movie.

The director, the person responsible for what happens in front of the camera, came over and introduced himself. He cautioned me not to turn around; I was doubling an actor who was my size and build, and he needed my back to the camera.

“Get the lion in up on the pedestal and make him snarl and cuff at you with his paw. If you can do that, we’ll have our print and we can all go home. Okay?” he asked.

“Okay,” I answered, more confidently than I felt.

I was escorted to makeup and wardrobe, and for the next hour I was made up to look like the actor. I was dressed in a standard blue and gold arena costume, with high boots, gold epaulets dangling on my shoulders, and a proper beaked cap on my head.

Back on the set, I saw they had set up a steel arena on the stage, with a circus scene backdrop. The cement floor in the arena was covered with a thick layer of sawdust. In the middle stood a heavy metal pedestal. A line of portable cages had been rolled up and positioned to form a chute, leading to a side door in the arena. Rex had settled down and was lying complacently at the far end of the chute. The director showed me my mark—the spot where I was to stand. It seemed a bit close to Rex’s pedestal, but I was not in any state of mind to question it.

I took my mark.

“Roll camera!” yelled the assistant director.

Cameras rolled.

“Action!” yelled the director.

I held the whip and the chair that Rex's handler had brought. A pistol was strapped to my belt, but I hadn't checked to see whether it was real or not. I nervously nodded for the handler to open the chute door and cracked the whip to signal the lion in, per the instructions I'd been given. The handler took a long pole and jabbed Rex in the belly. The lion responded by roaring in anger, jumping to his feet, and charging into the ring. He was huge, with a full mane, and I figured he had to weigh a good five hundred pounds.

I breathed for what felt like the first time in days. Well, I thought, he's in the ring. That's one down—two tricks to go.

He mounted the pedestal without me giving any cues at all. That was two. I jockeyed into position to get the snarl and cuff. I cracked the whip and gave the cue the handler had given me, and Rex gave a full snarl and his best MGM roar, lashing out at me with his massive paw. That's three, I thought. It's over. I heard the director yell, "Cut."

I've never felt so relieved in my life. My costume was soaked in sweat, but the scene had gone beautifully. I backed away and was about to give the signal to raise the chute door when I heard the director say, "That was great, son. Let's do it again."

What? How could we do better than that first take? In the years to come, I was to learn that directors *always* want that second shot.

"Tight shot on the lion!" he yelled. The cameramen fussed with their equipment. I tried my best to keep Rex on the pedestal until they were ready, but I could tell he was getting nervous.

After a few minutes the assistant director yelled again, "Roll camera!"

"Action!" yelled the director.

My sweat-soaked costume was beginning to chafe. The arm holding the chair was shaking, and the whip felt as if it weighed fifty pounds. In a near panic I approached the lion. Again I gave the cue and again he snarled. But this time I thought I glimpsed a different look in his eyes, as though he was realizing for the first time that I wasn't his real trainer. As I stepped into position to be cuffed, I saw his hind end move from a sitting position to a crouch. His ears disappeared into his mane, and a low, guttural, vibrato growl came from his throat. His huge eyes changed from tawny to blood red.

Oh shit! I thought.

Rex launched himself at me. The force of his lunge shot the pedestal back a full fifteen feet, and it hit the steel bars with a deafening clang. His front feet hit the ground only once before he reached me. He nailed me full in the chest, knocking me to the ground. The force was astonishing, and my head struck hard against the cement floor hiding under the sawdust. I saw a whirl of fur, flaming eyes, flashing teeth. The stench of his rancid breath filled my lungs.

All of a sudden, my arm was in his mouth. I actually heard my flesh pop as he sank his fang into my wrist. I put my arm over my face for protection and saw a huge, gaping hole where he'd puncture my wrist. Blood poured out onto my face and chest. I felt his hind claws ripping at my legs through the costume.

I looked up, and what I saw still gives me night sweats to this day. Rex was on top of me, his face not more than a foot from mine. He was roaring in defiance and rage, with blood—my blood!—soaking the fur around his mouth and dripping from his fangs. His crimson eyes were full of hatred.

Shock overcame me as I realized I was about to be killed. Strangely, the emotion I felt most strongly wasn't fear or pain, but anger. I was pissed. Obviously I had done something wrong. What? I didn't know. But I was furious at myself. I loved animals, and I knew that I could help them to communicate effectively with humans, so that we could work and live together in peaceful harmony. What was I doing here?

People were running around outside the arena screaming, but no one was coming in to help.

Blood from my wrist clouded my eyes, and I couldn't see. I was afraid to move, to resist in any way. Then I heard the steel arena door squeak open. Someone was coming! Someone was dragging something heavy across the cement floor, and suddenly there was a deafening, high-pitched noise, like a truck tire exploding. I strained to see what was happening, but all I could see was a dense cloud of smokelike vapor filling the arena. Using me as a launching platform, Rex leaped for the chute door. I knew he was safely enclosed when I heard the door slam shut.

I felt a number of hands pick me up and carry me outside, from the arena, through the lot, onto the street. Someone with a wet cloth wiped the blood from my face. I shaded my face from the sun and noticed sunlight shining through the hole where Rex's fang had gone through my wrist.

"We can't wait for the ambulance!" someone shouted. "Load him in here!"

I had a blurred view of a station wagon and someone lowering the back gate. "Where are you going with my new station wagon?" a woman yelled.

"This man needs to be taken to a hospital, now!"

Apparently her car was the only one parked in front of the stage door with the keys in the ignition.

"Don't let him bleed on my upholstery!" I heard her say. It was the last thing I heard for a while.

I woke up in the hospital, feeling as if I'd been run over by a freight train. I was bandaged all up and down my legs and arms. Rex's claws had ripped skin from all over my body, and he'd broken a few ribs when he used me as his launchpad. The worst part was the bite on my wrist.

"It went clean through," said the doctor. "Quarter inch either way and he would have severed an artery. You could have lost your hand."

When my visitors had left and I was alone for the night, I lay in that hospital bed and thought about what had happened—why the scene had gone the way it had. The attack did more than physically hurt me; it woke me up. My love of lions had blinded me to the dangers they posed. Of course, I'd known in some abstract way that lions were dangerous, but I had never dreamed that one would turn on me.

Rex had been my first close encounter with a large exotic, and while it wasn't exactly what I'd

had in mind, when I think about it now, it was probably the best thing that could have happened.

Animals aren't toys, or robots. Laura had been right; you can't get instructions on handling a lion five minutes before you enter a ring with him. You need to have a *relationship* with an animal before you can work together, and that doesn't go just for lions or other animals that can do you harm, but for *all* animals. There must be a tremendous amount of respect and trust between an animal and a human working together, or both of them are at terrific risk.

The worst part was that I'd known this, but my greed and my passion had gotten in the way. As a result, I'd come very close to losing my hand, and maybe even my life.

After I was released from the hospital, I went back to the studio and found the little old property man who had dragged a heavy carbon dioxide canister into the ring and blasted a cloud of the harmless chemical into the lion's face. I thanked him for saving my life. We talked for a while, and he said something I will always remember.

“That poor lion. He was just frightened. He thought you were going to hurt him.”

The incident with Rex could very well have been the last time I was alone with a lion, and many people assumed that it would cause me to abandon my dream of working with them. It did not. In fact, if anything, it intensified that dream. Although it had never been done before, I was determined to communicate with exotic animals by making a positive emotional connection with them. I wanted to create a scenario in which the animal enjoyed what he was doing and obeyed out of affection for his human friend, and a deep respect for him. I wanted to create a working relationship between humans and animals that was based on trust.

And I knew that the biggest challenge of all would be a big cat—specifically a lion.

Most cats—big or small—are loners by nature. In the wild, leopards, jaguars, lions, and many other exotic cats live in solitude, coming together only to mate. Once that desire is slaked, they go back to being alone. Cats don't seem to *need* one another.

Cats were domesticated much later than horses and dogs because of the forested areas where they lived. The fact that they were able to climb trees made it harder for humans to approach them. Although domesticated cats do show affection to their human friends, every cat's human is familiar with the feeling that he's just being used for shelter, food, and a comfy place to sleep.

I do think evolution is making domestic cats more affectionate, but it is still the case that if you're not providing adequate accommodations, a cat will find someone who can, regardless of your affection for one another. Even the most domesticated cat brings many of its wild ways with it. Cats don't take commands the way dogs do, and they remain fiercely independent, even when they're sharing a small space. It's one of the things I like best about them, but it can also make them difficult to communicate with.

In my heart of hearts, I knew that the key to communication between animals and humans was to approach them with love, not fear, and I knew that if I could accomplish that with a lion, I'd prove my theory.

All I needed was that lion.

The warm, gentle breeze hugged the earth, drying elephant grass damp from the morning's mist. All was still on the African veldt. The early sun meant that it was time to gather their kin and drink from the cool water bubbling from the underground springs, but it also signaled a time of caution. Sentinels from each species stood on duty, watching, ready to sound the alarm if need be.

A large full-bellied lioness lay in the deep grass under a low-lying umbrella acacia tree, just out of reach of the hot morning sun. A slightly smaller male lay perhaps fifty feet away, hidden in the grass, as motionless as a stone, his stomach filled with the same meal.

Breakfast had been an easy kill, over in a matter of seconds. The lone young wildebeest never saw them coming. Listening to the voice of nature that bound them together, the lions had sprung as one, precise, unified. The wildebeest died instantly; the male's huge paw had broken its neck.

On a nearby mound, two pairs of eyes peered from above a broken piece of decayed candelabra tree. They were the cubs of the female, six weeks old. Their father had lost the battle with this new male. He had left, bloody and torn, to lick his wounds and then to seek out another lioness to start another family.

The new male had not taken kindly to the cubs. The lioness launched a full-out attack against him whenever he showed aggression toward them, or the cubs wouldn't have stood a chance. She was larger than he was, and vicious when her babies were threatened.

The carcass of the wildebeest lay between the adults and the cubs. The grotesque rib cage and eyeless skull were left as offerings to the vultures, who waited their turn, high in the yellow fever trees.

The cubs, too, smelled the warm blood of the dead wildebeest, and saliva dripped from their lips. Although they were too young to eat the meat, their instincts were already kicking in, and they longed to wet their tiny muzzles with the source of the delicious smell.

The male stretched and yawned, skin pulled taut over his full, round belly. He licked his bloody paws, eyes closed, enjoying the feel of his tongue against his skin.

The cubs had been commanded by their mother to stay put, but they were irresistibly drawn by the tantalizing, warm smell coming from the kill site. They crept forward slowly, nostrils filled with the

scent, anxious to get close, and lick, maybe even tear a bit of skin off the carcass. Their mother had never left them alone so long after a kill. Had she forgotten? Their stomachs ached with hunger, and the smell made them even more desperate to nurse.

Their motion caught the male's eye. He stopped his cleaning, his tongue stilled by a thought: these weren't his cubs, not from his seed. He looked at the lioness. She lay motionless on her back, belly to the sky.

A primitive instinct overcame him. His eyes widened, and the furrows of his brow deepened as he looked again at the little cubs. To him, they weren't cute. He didn't care that they were kin to his race. He felt no paternal emotions toward them at all. He simply saw another lion's offspring. They would grow and have cubs of their own and his territory would once again be threatened.

He got to his feet and walked toward them, stiff-legged.

When the cubs saw their new father coming toward them, they hid in the bush, half snarling and half purring, not sure. The female cub's ears flashed back and forth. Father or predator? Their mother was still lying belly-up. The big male advanced to within a few feet of the girl cub, and she, more eager than her brother for the security her new father could bring, decided to trust this new lion.

The big male looked down at her, his expression completely passive. Then, with a lunge, he grabbed her by the head and with a sharp crunch, squashed her little skull. The cub dangled from his mouth, twitching, then terribly still. He relaxed his jaw, letting the tiny body slip from his mouth to the ground. He raised his head, pressing his tongue to the roof of his mouth. Wrinkling his lips, he grimaced, smelling and tasting the cub's essence, acknowledging his heritage and feeling his own strength.

Now his gaze fell on the little male, trembling from what he had seen. The cub's eyes were enormous, and urine soaked his tail. The huge lion moved in his direction, and the cub backed away under an acacia bush, snarling.

Finally the lioness heard the cub's distress and sat up, alert, immediately smelling danger. The male, claws extended, lunged for the cub, one enormous paw swiping under the bush. The cub, shaking with fear, backed even deeper under the thorns.

His mother was in the air, and in two bounds, she'd hit the male, knocking his hind legs out from under him. He whipped around, snarling his fury. She was bigger than he, but he was defending his territory now, and she was no match for his onslaught. Forced to back down, she slunk away, and the male turned to finish what he had started.

But the little male cub was gone, racing full tilt back through the wait-a-bit bush, its thorns ripping and tearing at his body. He kept running, tripping, falling over boulders, sliding on the loose gravel beds. He ran for his life.

The male did not give chase. The cub was gone, and he was content—perhaps because he knew that the cub's chance of surviving without his mother was slim. The cub's mother settled back down, resigned. Her new mate had done what his instinct told him to do—kill another male's offspring to make room for his own.

The cub didn't know that he wasn't being pursued, and so he kept running, far away from everything he'd ever known in his short life. The only home he'd ever known had been the rolling vistas of the grasslands on the veldt. Weeks before, he had watched the last of the menacing rain clouds form in the distant hills, sweeping across the open spaces of the savannah. Silently they had drifted toward his family. It had scared him when the sky darkened, the warm sultry wind blowing in advance, drying the ground against the onslaught of the rain. The animals had moved, putting the trees and bushes between them and the soon-to-be deluge. Droplets of early rain sprinkled the earth, and dust-covered raindrops beaded on the ground. Lightning cracked across the sky, followed by the ominous sound of thunder. The cubs had pushed down under their mother, down where the heat of her body took away the worry, where the noise of the storm could barely be heard.

Those chilly winter storms had left the plains verdant, with lush emeralds and lime greens, and he had spent his early life playing there. But now the little cub found himself in inhospitable territory, a dry, mountainous, brush-covered region. It was far too soon for him to be out on his own. He needed protection, shelter, and above all, the warmth and nourishment that only his mother could provide. And he missed his sister. He whined plaintively as he tripped his way through the scrubby underbrush.

Predators were everywhere. Hyenas, jackals, tawny eagles—practically everything that moved was a danger to something so small. The cub knew of predators, not by name or sight, but by the way his mother's body hardened when they were near. Perhaps his lion smell would keep them away. But he didn't know to creep in the bushes when a jackal appeared, or to stay still when an eagle made lazy circles above him, or to lie in a deserted warthogs' burrow until the yelp of the hyena was far away.

Though he was scratched, thin, and weak, he was driven by his own powerful survival instinct to continue.

Soon a cool breeze and a powerful roar signaled that he'd reached the mighty Zambezi River. Winding its way through the canyons, the river opened up into a small valley, spreading wide and shallow across the flat terrain. The cub, exhausted and dehydrated, staggered down a ravine into the water and sank down among the water greens. In a hurry to slurp the cool water, he dropped his head beneath the surface and filled his nostrils, setting off a spasm of coughing. Too much too soon. After a bit, he steadied himself enough to drink without coughing. A breeze cooled his fevered body.

He lay flat, stretched out in a shallow place, his chin lying on the sandy bottom, water up to the edge of his nose. The current swirled around him. Small bands of "water-walker" spiders skipped past on their spindly legs. Looking for something to ease his hunger pangs, he sucked on some bitter water plants. They brought foam to his lips, then a wrenching, spasmodic heaving. Whatever little nourishment was left in his stomach was vomited out and swept away with the current.

The minutes turned into hours, and the hot African sun began to take its toll. The cub wandered down the riverbank on bloodied paws, searching for a spot of shade. As he rounded a bend, he saw a blurred movement through his bloodshot, drooping eyes. He felt warmth coming from the shape. His feverish mind saw his mother, heard her calling, ready to lick his wounds and fill his tummy with warm, life-giving milk.

He opened his mouth to let out a cry, but no sound came out. His head bobbed on his thin shoulders as he ran, falling, toward the warm blur, and collapsed at its feet. It was a woman, and as she gathered him up as his mother once had, he felt as safe and secure as he had in his mother's paw.

His soft muzzle nudged her warm skin, looking for a nipple. As he began to lose consciousness, his small mouth nursed a finger. He couldn't understand why there wasn't any milk.

There are events that change the entire course of your life. The event that changed mine forever started with a phone call from friends I hadn't heard from for a long time. It was the mid-1950s, and I was living on a ranch in the Santa Monica Hills. I was making a living renting animals to the movies and working as a stuntman. I had also built a reputation as a conservationist, and lectured often on the future of exotic animals at various animal nonprofits, universities, and conferences.

It was my belief then, as it is now, that the human species' consistent refusal to treat animals and their habitats with decency and respect will inevitably have one unhappy result: the extinction of those animals. I am an extremely optimistic person. I tend to see the glass not half full, or half empty, but overflowing. But I am sorry to say that I do not have a great deal of faith in my fellow man, especially when it comes to our animal brethren, and I have spent much of my career trying to bring the world's attention to this issue—before it is too late.

In the early fifties, during a symposium on endangered species at the University of California at Davis, one of the finest veterinary schools in the world, I had met a wonderful couple, Jack and Brini. Jack was a rather handsome Englishman, tall and a bit on the thin side, with graying temples, a slight mustache, and a mild accent. Brini, also British, had been raised in the United States. She was a tanned blond, with just a hint of an accent and a truly terrific smile. They had met when she was at Stanford University, and had married a year later.

They were studying animal conservation, which was how they ended up at my lecture on the survival instinct, and the three of us hit it off immediately. We agreed completely about animals and their predicaments, and we spent lots of time after the seminar discussing our thoughts on these topics.

“I think human overpopulation is the primary cause of the depletion of our natural reserves,” Brini said during dinner on our last evening. “Where are these animals supposed to live, once we've destroyed their habitats? It's their territory, for heaven's sake.”

“Don't get started, Brini,” Jack warned. But I was as passionate about the subject as she was, and the conversation went on late into the night. Sure that I was among like-minded souls, I shared my desire to have and train an African lion using positive emotional training techniques, and to build a relationship based on trust and respect. “I would love to be able to establish a way of communicating that would bring our two species closer together,” I told Brini and Jack. I spoke at length about my budding theories, and they agreed that it would be a wonderful experiment.

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