

CHAPTER 14 : INFINITE FORTITUDE

Ernst Luchtenstein is his name.....

MANY WHITE MEN have lived close to nature in the solitudes to the north and south of the Orange River. Voortrekkers, soldiers, explorers, farmers, trekboers, police on camels, outlaws on horseback, missionaries, men of infinite fortitude - some found what they sought and the happiest were those who did not seek wealth.

Yet I know one fugitive who lived the most primitive life of all, penniless and hungry as any Hottentot; and he became the richest man in South-West Africa. I do not think it would have turned out like that in any other country.

Ernst Luchtenstein is his name, and he gave me a new impression of the wilderness that stretches down to the river. Only a strong character could have survived the life of extreme isolation that Luchtenstein chose.

For eighteen months he lived in hiding among the Karas mountains and made the veld support him.

His father was a German transport rider, carrying supplies to the army in the field during the war against the Hottentots.

Ernst arrived in Luderitz in 1906 with his mother, two brothers and a sister; he was eleven years old when they left the seaport to join the head of the family at Keetmanshoop.

They travelled with a convoy of seven oxwagons, loaded with army stores and their own little possessions.

Between Aus and Kankeip, military outposts on the 200 mile track to Keetmanshoop, the convoy was intercepted by Cornelius, leader of the Bethanie Hottentots.

Ernst's mother, new to that wild country and desperate in the desire to save her children, ran forward and knelt before Cornelius. "Kneel before God, but not before any man," said Cornelius in perfect German.

Cornelius looted the stores, but left the Luchtenstein wagon untouched. (The same chivalrous treatment of women and children, you see, which Von Schaurath had described to me in his castle.)

Next morning a small German patrol was sighted, however, and Ernst saw the Hottentots shooting down the soldiers.

That was the first of many adventures in the territory.

After a few weeks at school in Keetmanshoop, young Ernst went to work as his father's touleier (leader of the team of oxen), and later as a wagon-driver.

He fell out with his father and found a home with a farmer named Mackay.

It was a queer household, for Mackay had married a Hottentot and there was a large half-caste family.

Ernst grew up with them, learnt tracking and all the lore of the veld; he spoke Hottentot fluently and could understand the Bushmen.

The farm was called "Paradise," about 18 miles to the north of Keetmanshoop and close to the present Berseba native reserve.

The war with the Hottentots dragged on. One night a band of Hottentots raided "Paradise" farm, awoke Mackay and demanded rifles.

Mackay was a bold man with one eye and the appearance of a pirate. "If you want my rifle, you'll have to take it," challenged Mackay.

The Hottentots contented themselves with killing one of Mackay's cows and roasting it.

Ernst and the Mackay children joined the raiders round the fire. They were members of the party, and a few years later Ernst Luchtenstein had reason to be thankful that the Hottentots regarded him as a friend.

As a youth Ernst followed several occupations. He started a butchery in Keetmanshoop, slaughtered the cattle, skinned the carcasses and sold them over the counter.

He also tried the hotel trade; but found no amusement in serving beer to drunken German officers until the early hours of the morning.

The veld claimed him again and he returned to farming. He was too poor to make a success of it, and up to 1914 he had never earned more than a pound or two a week.

At the outbreak of war in 1914, of course, Ernst Luchtenstein became a German soldier. Both his brothers were captured; but although Ernst's horse was shot under him in one of the skirmishes in the south, he retreated northwards with the main force and remained in the field until the surrender in July, 1915.

Having lived as he pleased for years, Ernst did not relish the prospect of a prisoner-of-war camp - and he heard that all German soldiers were to be interned.

In fact, he ranked as a reservist, and would have been allowed to return to his farm; but he knew nothing of this. "I decided to discharge myself and remain a free man," Ernst Luchtenstein told me.

A train-load of South African troops was going south - bearded burghers who wore only a semblance of uniform.

Luchtenstein tore off his German badges and shoulder-straps. He had a slouch hat very much like the others wore; he was dressed in war-stained khaki, and when he joined the train he passed as a member of the commando. Just before the train reached Keetmanshoop he jumped off and vanished into the veld.

If you have ever seen the Karas mountains then you can imagine the wilderness in which Ernst Luchtenstein sought refuge. There are two ranges, the Little Karas in the west, most of the peaks not much higher than koppies; and the Great Karas range ten to twenty miles away to the east across a sandy plain.

Both ranges rise from a plateau, where the grazing is often good. It was a wonderful season when Luchtenstein arrived, for the summer rains of 1915 had revived the fountains and veldkos was abundant. In a drought year he could not have survived in the Karas mountains.

Nevertheless, life for Luchtenstein was reduced to the simplest terms. It called for endurance far above the normal, and a month of it would have been too much for many strong men. I tried to discover Luchtenstein's secret, and at last he told me. "I was never a spoilt child, and comfort meant nothing to me," declared Luchtenstein. "Though I had not a penny in cash, I had something more valuable.

When the war started I had buried my own rifle and fifty rounds of ammunition. I took this into the mountains with me." With only fifty cartridges, of course,

Luchtenstein had to be careful. He was prepared to wait until the end of the war in Europe; and like others at that period he thought it would only be a matter of months.

Apart from the rifle, his worldly goods consisted of his grey army overcoat, a spear, a few mess tins, and a mongrel dog which had followed him into the mountains.

Luchtenstein trained the dog to hunt dassies. Every day the dassies came down from their rocks to graze; and when the dog raced up to them the foolish dassies tried to hide under small stones. One dassie, weighing up to three pounds, provided Luchtenstein with enough meat for a day, and the dog lived on the same diet. Luchtenstein baked the dassies and ate them day after day.

On moonlight nights the porcupines emerged from their burrows. They are slow at night, and when Luchtenstein and his dog found porcupines, a blow on the nose finished them.

Then there was a change of meat. Often Luchtenstein made traps from horse-hair, Hottentot traps with a noose for guinea-fowl and partridge. These he set near water-holes.

When they failed he made the age-old Bushman trap - a heavy stone supported by a stick, baited with seeds. The stone fell on many a guinea-fowl. "Meat, meat, meat," recalled Luchtenstein."

I had so much meat that I seldom used my rifle. When I did, I never fired more than one shot.

You know how it is in the lonely places ... if you hear a sound like a shot it may just be someone breaking a tree branch. But if you hear a second shot - then you are sure.

I crawled up to my game and made certain that my one shot brought down a klipbok or kudu, springbok or gemsbok."

After six months entirely alone in the mountains Luchtenstein saw some Hottentots he had known before the war. Up to that time he had avoided all human beings; he had been on to run to avoid even the possibility of pursuit.

Now he felt safer and he came out of hiding and spoke to the Hottentots. They knew nothing about the course of the war; but they gave him milk and later they brought him a goat.

For the meat-satiated Luchtenstein this was luxury. "I built myself a pondok in a lonely kloof and became tame," he told me. "I had a feeling that no one was looking for me ... and the milk was wonderful after all that meat.

Tea and coffee I did not miss - they had never become necessities as far as I was concerned, and I still prefer milk."

Luchtenstein had been curing skins to pass the time. He had made several pairs of shoes, using steenbok leather for the uppers and thick kudu for the soles. He gave his whole stock of skins to the Hottentots in exchange for the goat and felt wealthy indeed. Then a leopard took the goat. Luchtenstein devised a trap for the leopard, but it was too light and the leopard dragged the trap away.

Luchtenstein, smarting from the loss of his goat, followed the trail. He could have shot the leopard, but he preferred to save the cartridge. "I came round a bush and found myself staring into the eyes of the leopard," said Luchtenstein.

"The trap was between its feet, and I saw it could not spring on me. So I picked up a jagged rock and smashed the leopard between the eyes. Just to make sure, I hit it with my kierrie."

There are no lions in Karas mountains, and the encounter with the leopard was almost the only adventure Luchtenstein could recall.

"All animals are harmless until you attack them," he declares. But he nearly fell over a cliff on one occasion in his anxiety to dodge a spitting cobra.

I asked Luchtenstein whether he ever felt lonely, and he pondered for a long time before he replied. "Perhaps. I can't remember very well.

Yes, I must have been lonely, because after six months I started visiting friends on farms near the mountains.

No one gave me away. They supplied me with a few little things, but my needs were small. I had always led a hard life, and knew almost nothing of home life.

Yes, I went to the farms because I wanted to talk."

At last, after nearly eighteen months in the mountains, Luchtenstein learnt from a Hottentot that the police were inquiring about him.

That made him more careful. He ventured across the plain to the Great Karas mountains, a remote range at that time.

In those mountains the Bondelswart Hottentots had made their last stand against the Germans, prolonging the war for two years.

From those peaks Luchtenstein could scan an enormous area. He could see the old volcano of Brukkaros more than a hundred miles away.

Westwards there was the dry bed of the Great Fish River; and beyond, the Konkiep hills where he had first met the Hottentots.

But never was there a sign of pursuit. Lulled into a sense of security again, Luchtenstein came down from the mountains and rested in a Hottentot's hut. He had not been there for long when he heard horses approaching and knew that he was cornered. Two white police troopers and a native constable entered the hut. "There's Mr. Ernst," exclaimed one of the policemen. "Man, but we've been looking for you for a long time.

There's a military captain in Keetmans who wants to see you urgently." The policemen were extremely polite, but Luchtenstein thought that was only their pleasant way of dealing with the situation.

They lent him the native constable's mule for the journey to Keetmanshoop; and when they camped that night they gave him food and a blanket and did not appear to regard him as their prisoner.

Still Luchtenstein saw the dreaded internment camp ahead of him, and decided to escape, if he could, during the night. He kept a sharp look-out, but whenever he rose one of the constables was gazing at him.

It was a bitter night. At last the constable spoke. "I see you can't sleep either - you must be as cold as I am," he said.

There was no way out, and next morning Luchtenstein rode into Keetmanshoop with the police. He was shown into an office. It was the turning point in his whole life, but he thought his freedom was ended and his thoughts were gloomy.

The South African officer behind the desk, Captain Tilley, was in charge of the commissariat. He welcomed Luchtenstein and came straight to the point.

"I want to go out hunting and everyone tells me you are the man who knows where to find the game," said Captain Tilley. "Can you take me to the kudu?"

For years before 1914 Luchtenstein had been the recognised hunting guide of the district - and the finest shot. Yet he was staggered when he heard Tilley's request.

He had expected to find himself behind barbed wire, and here was this offer. Gratefully he agreed. "You'll have to look out, or the dogs will go for you," remarked Tilley as Luchtenstein left the office.

With his beard, tattered clothes and rough buckskin shoes he looked a wild man of the mountains indeed. After the shooting trip Tilley gave Luchtenstein a contract to supply grass for army fodder.

That year, like the previous year, the veld was a flower garden and the yellow grass stood high. "Within five months I had made £2,000 - just by cutting grass," Luchtenstein told me.

"At last I was able to go about farming properly, and only then did I realise that my eighteen months in the wilderness had not been wasted.

You see, I had come to know every hectare of the ground among the Karas mountains. Land was cheap in those days.

I bought the farms where rain was certain to fall, and when the karakul industry boomed I made a fortune."

At one time Ernst Luchtenstein owned 400,000 hectares - nearly a million acres.

A new system of land taxation was introduced in South-West Africa fairly recently, however, and Luchtenstein found it advisable to reduce his holdings to about 60,000 hectares.

The one-man butcher's shop in Keetmanshoop became a general store with forty-one assistants, and Luchtenstein used to travel by air to New York to buy goods.

Luchtenstein has another claim to fame of which he is not at all proud.

In August, 1933, he was on his farm Gammib when he heard that six lions were prowling round his sheep. He went out after them and shot all six with six shots - a record for Africa at the time.

"Lions are easy," declared Luchtenstein when I asked him about it. "Anyone who gets mauled by a lion has been asking for trouble.

But a wounded gemsbok - there's a dangerous animal, much more ferocious than a lion. I only shot those lions because they were after my sheep."

Throughout his career Luchtenstein has never shown the slightest interest in minerals or mines.

He never prospected the Karas mountains; his eyes were always on the animals, the water-holes and the grass.

He could have taken part in diamond prospecting expeditions in the great days of the early discoveries round Luderitz; but he preferred transport riding at a wage of fifteen shillings a week. In recent years Luchtenstein has often flown over the remote kloofs where he found sanctuary long ago.

As the old landmarks appear he thinks of his luck - not the luck that brought him wealth, but something that he avoided when he was a fugitive.

"I was young and inexperienced - and very eager to remain a free man," Luchtenstein explained to me.

"During those first few months I hid myself whenever I saw white people in the distance. But I often ask myself what I would have done if I had run into a police patrol. I might have used my rifle ... and then it would have been a very different story."

Luchtenstein was not the only man to disappear into the unmapped spaces of South-West Africa.

It happened again during the 1939- 1945 War; and not long afterwards I met one of the two German scientists who followed Luchtenstein's example. Dr. Henno Martin and Dr. Edward Korn, the scientists, were anti-Nazis who left Germany in 1935 and found refuge in South-West Africa.

"To The River's End" Lawrence G. GREEN.