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CHARLIE CAME ACROSS THE compound at about thirty miles an hour, with his nose a couple of inches behind a brightly coloured lizard. The lizard was running like crazy, zigzagging and swerving, and Charlie, all ninety pounds of him, was skidding in the dust, his paws scrabbling for grip like the tyres of a racing car. Sally, the fawn bitch, was watching him with a very feminine look that suggested she thought he was quite mad getting himself hot and bothered in a mid-morning temperature of over a hundred degrees.

I could smell the dust. "Charlie ... Charlie! Pack it up."

The lizard reached the tree in the centre of my compound, and went up it like a purple leather squirrel. Charlie twisted himself out of the way of one of the roots, and slowed to a walk as though the lizard had never existed.

"Charlie! Come here, you sod."

He looked round at me and grinned; he's always got to hunt something, that dog.

"He chase lizard all time," said my houseboy Matt, from the bungalow verandah. "But he no deh chop them. He one funny dog, Master." Matt chuckled. He scratched his head. We live a fair way out in the bush and there isn't any barber, so Matt's hair is wild and fuzzy. He looks like an antique Dervisher, not a civilised West African.

"I'm off up the digging," I said. "Be back for lunch. What we got today?"

"Same like yesterday." Matt avoided my eyes. "Only goat meat, Master. Goat rib meat and yam. Also make groundnut soup."

I had goat yesterday, and the day before. Come to think of it, I'd had goat meat for the past two weeks. No, that's not right, I had a scrawny chicken last Sunday; there was so little meat on it an English cook would have thought it was a pigeon.

"Sorry, Master, we no go township. Not find other meat here."

"Okay," I told him. "I'll drive in later. Write me a list and I'll get it from the

store."

I hadn't moved yet, but I was sweating. You should feel the heat out here! Just before the rains it sits on you like a bale of hay. I don't normally wear a shirt and my skin was dry brown scales down the backs of my arms, and across my shoulders.

"Charlie ... Sal ... come on, you two." They joined me on the track out of the compound, Sal on one side of me, keeping an even foot away from me, moving like a well-trained guide dog, and Charlie, always the idiot, leaping at the bushes as we passed, sniffing, stopping for a quick piddle, coming back to me and barging my thigh with his sleek, muscular black shoulder. "Get out of it." He snapped at a twig lying across the path and I almost somersaulted over his back. He didn't even look up at me, but just bounded a few paces ahead and went on looking and hunting.

There's one big boulder, on a corner of the track, and I always stop there and have a look out across the valley. I'm a sucker for views, I always have been. Maybe because the only views we had when I was a kid were of the huge black