

The Flood

Blueprint for Reading

BACKGROUND BYTES

What is a flood? Floods are high water levels that cover normally dry land areas. Wherever there is a coast—of a lake, river, or stream—floods occur naturally and regularly. Lakes, rivers, and streams may flood, when there is a lot of rain over a long period of time, or when there is brief, intense rain during a storm.

Floods create wetlands. Wetlands are what used to be called swamps. Swamps were thought to be useless. But they are one of nature's building blocks. When the Mississippi River used to flood, it dumped millions of pounds of soil on the Mississippi delta, which was rich and fertile land. As the soil built up and became firm, a landmass was created. This landmass became the southern part of Louisiana.

Since floods can be destructive to man, we have tried to control them. We built dams and levees. A levee is a wall that is intended to keep the river out of your living room. And so, the U.S. Army Corps of engineers built 2,000 miles of levees along the Mississippi River. As the people of Louisiana have learned, controlling the Mississippi River has created a catastrophe for America. Without floods and the soil that they bring, the southern tip of Louisiana is drying out and falling into the Gulf of Mexico. Every year, a chunk of land the size of Manhattan turns to water in Louisiana. Vital American industries such as fishing, gas, and oil, are threatened.

INTO . . . *The Flood*

A wise man once said, "Nothing is so strong as gentleness; nothing so gentle as real strength." We usually do not think of being gentle with animals that have been taken out of the wild. Perhaps we should think about this. In *The Flood* we see the power of Ralph Helfer's affection training.

For Helfer to be kind and gentle, he must also be calm. During the emergency, he communicates this inner sense of calm to both the animals and other people.

In *The Flood*, Helfer experiences wave after wave of disastrous events. He is driven to keep trying, because of his respect and love for the animals. How many animals can he save? Helfer's experience reminds us that no matter what we do, trouble may still come. Times of crisis test and develop our inner resources.

FOCUS

- **Nonfiction Narrative**

A **nonfiction narrative** tells the story of an actual event. Often a nonfiction narrative is just an outline of what happens. In this story, Ralph Helfer has written a suspenseful and detailed account. Reading this story, we are flooded with images: the sights, sounds, feel, and smell of the disaster.

- **Language Arts Skill:**

- **Cause and Effect**

When an unusual event occurs and we want to tell others about it, it is often difficult to tell the story the way that it happened. What happened first? What happened next? Ralph Helfer has managed to do this very skillfully in *The Flood*.

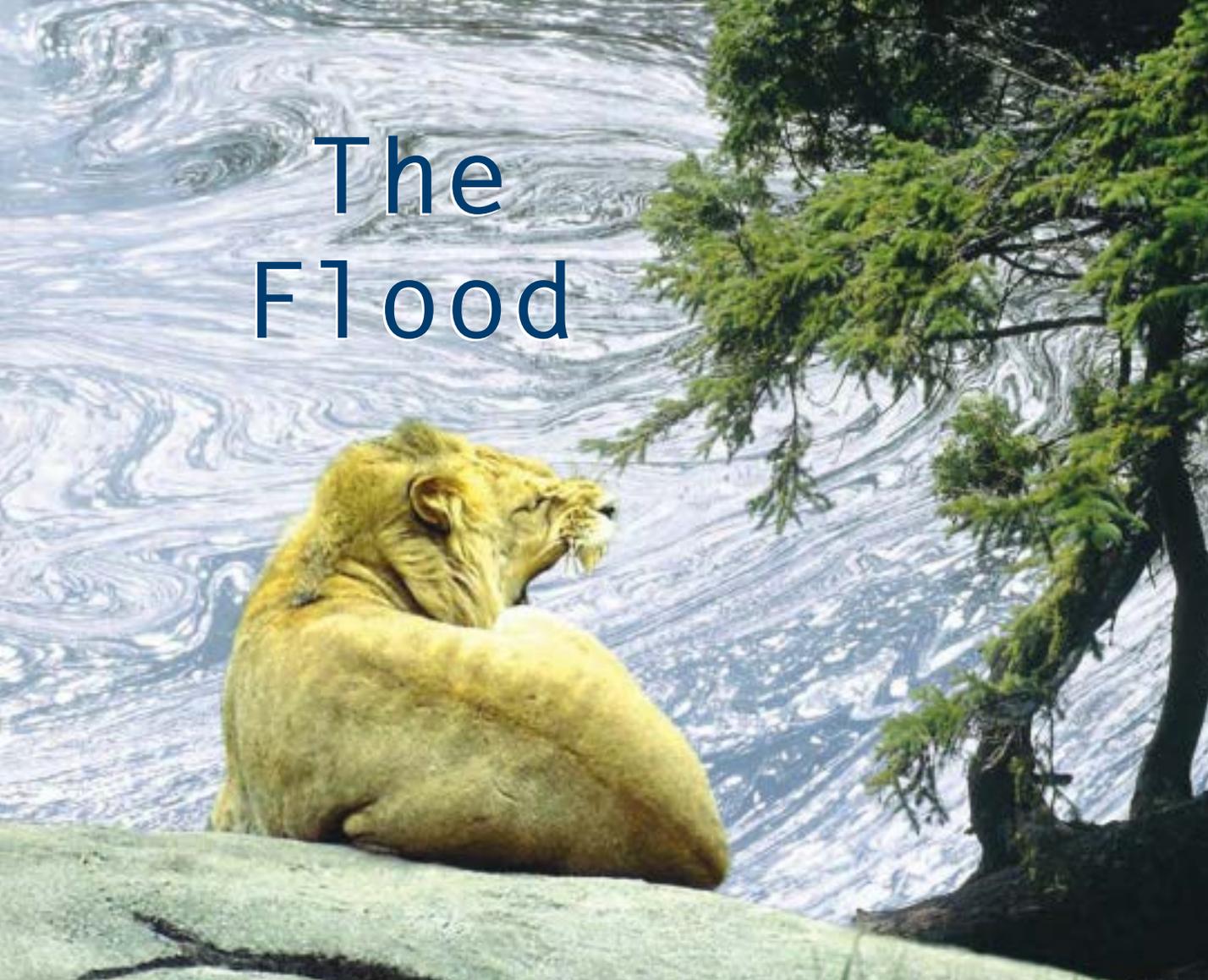
When we write a narrative, we need to give the reader a clear sense of the way events unfolded. This helps the reader to see cause and effect relationships accurately. Our lives are filled with cause and effect situations. We go to bed early, and so we feel wide-awake in the morning. We rake the leaves, which makes our parents happy. In a cause and effect relationship, something happens, causing something else to happen. Remember that one effect may

well be the cause of yet another event.

The events in *The Flood* clearly have cause and effect relationships. Rain continues for weeks and almost causes the dam to burst. The floodgates are opened so that the dam will not burst. This sends a rush of water into the already saturated area. The floodwaters destroy buildings and cages and animal habitats. Heroic efforts to rescue the animals follow.

- **About Setting**

The story opens on Ralph Helfer's ranch, Africa U.S.A. The ranch is located in Soledad Canyon, 30 miles north of Los Angeles, beside the banks of the Santa Clarita stream. The ranch is home to 1,500 wild animals. This unusual setting is the source of suspense, excitement, and tragedy, as the canyon is flooded. Early in Helfer's narrative he writes that suddenly a rushing wall of water with large oak trees and sheds crashed into the compound. It uprooted cages and overturned buildings and trucks. This is a story in which setting is the basis for all the overwhelming events that occur.

A lion is shown in profile, sitting on a grey rock. The background is a distorted, wavy image of a blue sky and green trees, creating a surreal, watery effect. The title 'The Flood' is written in a large, blue, serif font across the top of the image.

The Flood

from The Beauty of the Beasts Ralph Helfer

It was raining that morning, as usual. For weeks it had been coming down—sometimes heavily, with thunder and lightning, and sometimes with just a mist of light rain. But it was always there, and by now the blankets, the beds, and the whole house were constantly damp.

My career was at a peak. I'd spent twelve years struggling to get to the top, and I had finally made it. My life was pretty good. I had just completed the back-to-back shooting of *Daktari* and *Gentle Ben*, and I was living at our new ranch, Africa U.S.A., with 1,500 wild animals and a crew of dedicated keepers and trainers.

The ranch was beautiful. Nestled at the bottom of Soledad Canyon,¹ about thirty miles north of Los Angeles, the property snaked for a mile down the canyon beside the banks of the Santa Clarita² stream. The highway wound above it on one side, the railroad track on the other.

We'd had heavy rains before, and even a few floods, but nothing we couldn't handle. There was a flood-control dam above us, fifteen miles up the canyon, and we weren't too worried about the stream's overflowing. But just to make sure, we had asked the city's flood-control office to advise us. They checked their records for the biggest flood in the office's hundred-year history, and calculated that to handle one that size we would need a channel 100 feet wide, 12 feet deep, and 1 mile long. It cost us \$100,000 and three months of hard work, but we built it. It was worth it to feel safe.

Toni and I had grabbed a few hours' sleep before leaving the house, which was located off the ranch up on a hill, and heading out into the rain again early this morning to make sure our animals were dry and safe.

On arriving at the compound, Toni went over to check on the "wild string," a group of lions, tigers, bears, and leopards that had been donated to us by people who never should have had them in the first

place. Hopeless animal lovers that we were, we had taken them in, even though we know that very few spoiled mature animals could ever be indoctrinated with affection training.³

I checked at the office for messages, then headed for "Beverly Hills," our nickname for the area where our movie-star animals lived—Gentle Ben, Clarence the cross-eyed lion, Judy the chimp, Bullfrog the "talking" buffalo, Modoc the elephant, and many others. The rain had become a steady downpour by the time I arrived there. Everything seemed to be in order, so I went on to the rhinos. No problems there, either.

As I left the rhinos, I noticed that I could no longer jump over the stream that ran beside their barn. I was starting to get a little concerned. The sky was now opening up with a vengeance.⁴ I wrapped my poncho around me and continued my tour of inspection.⁵

I was wondering how Toni was making out with the wild string when

1. *Soledad Canyon* (SO leh dad KAN yun)

2. *Santa Clarita* (SAN tuh kluh REE tuh)

3. *Affection training* is a technique for training animals that uses a system of love, patience, and rewards rather than force and physical threats or punishment.

4. Something *done with a vengeance* (VEN juntz) is done with great force or violence.

5. Someone who walks through an area to evaluate the situation is taking a *tour of inspection*.

WORD BANK

nestled (NES uld) *v.*: lying close and snug; located in a sheltered spot

compound (KOM pound) *n.*: a separate area, usually fenced or walled, containing residences, business offices, barracks, or other structures

Miguel,⁶ a Mexican keeper who had been with us for six years, arrived to care for the animals in the Beverly Hills section. He smiled his broad, gold-capped grin, then disappeared around a bend of the stream.

Then my head trainer, Frank Lamping, arrived. He told me that the earthen dam above us was about to go. To prevent the dam from bursting, the flood-control people were opening the floodgates to release the pressure. We were to watch out for some heavy water coming downstream.

The crew had all been working continuously from morning until night since the rains had begun, to make sure that the ranch was safe. Now we had to redouble our efforts.

I told Frank to check the stock area.⁷ A trainer yelled from the roadway above that he had the nursery section under control.

I found some pretty badly undermined cages in my area and set to work with a shovel to fill the erosion. I was looking down at my shovel, working hard, when I heard a noise. It was a low roar, and it was quickly becoming louder and closer. I remember

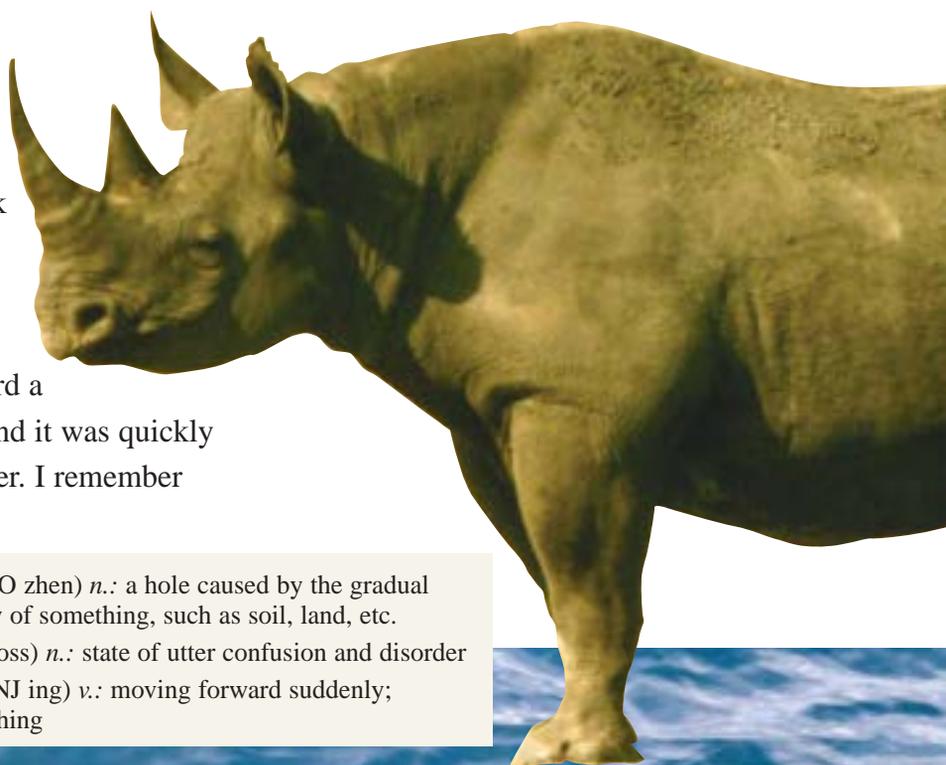
just looking over my shoulder, and suddenly there it was—a wall of water carrying with it full-sized oak trees, sheds, branches. Down it came, crashing and exploding against the compound, uprooting cages, overturning buildings, trucks—anything in its way.

Instantly, everything was in chaos. Sheer panic broke out among the animals in the Beverly Hills section. Lions were roaring and hitting against the sides of their cages; bears were lunging against the bars; chimps were screaming. The water was starting to rock the cages. Some were already floating and were about to be swept downstream.

I didn't know what to do first! I raced for the cages, but was thrown down by the

6. *Miguel* (me GELL)

7. Cattle and horses, or *livestock*, are kept in the *stock area*.



WORD BANK

erosion (ih RO zhen) *n.*: a hole caused by the gradual wearing away of something, such as soil, land, etc.

chaos (KAY oss) *n.*: state of utter confusion and disorder

lunging (LUNJ ing) *v.*: moving forward suddenly; plunging; rushing



weight of the water. Miguel came running over, yelling half in English and half in Spanish. I told him to grab a large coil of rope that was hanging in a tree nearby. I fastened it around me and, with Miguel holding the other end, I started out into the water. If I could just get to the cages, I could unlock them and set the animals free. At least then they could fend for themselves. It was their only chance. Otherwise, they would all drown in their cages.

The water was rushing past me furiously. I struggled through it to Gentle Ben's cage, fumbling for the key. "Don't drop it!" I mumbled to myself. The key turned, I threw open the door, and the great old bear landed right on top of me in his panic for freedom.

I grabbed Ben's heavy coat and hung on as his massive body carried me to a group of cages holding more than twenty animals. The water was now five or six feet deep. Cages were starting to come loose from their foundations; the animals were swimming inside them, fighting for breath. I let go of Ben and grabbed onto the steel bars of one of the cages. My heart sank as I saw Ben dog-paddling, trying to reach the embankment. He never did. I could just barely make out his form as he was carried through some rough white water and around a bend before he was lost from view.

One by one I released the animals—leopards, tigers, bears—talking as calmly as I could, even managing an occasional pat or kiss of farewell. I watched as they were carried away, swept along with the torrent of water. Some would come together for a moment and would then be whisked away, as though a giant hand had come up and shoved them. Some went under. I strained to see whether any of these came up again, but I couldn't tell.

My wonderful, beloved animals were all fighting for their lives. I felt sick and helpless.

To my right, about thirty feet out in the water and half submerged, was a large, heavy steel cage on wheels with a row of four compartments in it. I managed to get to it just as the force of the current started to move it. I began to open the compartments, one by one, but now the cage was moving faster downstream, carrying me with it. I looked back to the shore, at Miguel. He saw the problem, and with his end of the rope he threw a dally⁸ around a large tree branch. We were running out of time. If the rope came to the end of its slack before I could get it off me and onto the cage, we would lose the cage. It was picking up speed, and the animals inside were roaring and barking in terror.

I decided to hold the cage myself,

8. A *dally* is a lasso or a rope.

**WORD
BANK**

embankment (im BANK munt) *n.*: a long bank or mound to hold back water
torrent (TOR unt) *n.*: a stream of water flowing rapidly and violently

with the rope tied around my waist. There were two beautiful wolves in the last cage, Sheba and Rona. Toni and I had raised them since they were pups. I was at their door, fumbling with the lock, when the rope went taut. I thought it would cut me in half. I grabbed the steel bars with both hands, leaving the key in the lock, praying it wouldn't drop out. When I reached down once more to open the lock, the key fell into the water! I was stunned, frozen. I knew I had just signed those animals' death warrants. The water behind the cage was building up a wall of force. I held on as tightly as I could, but finally the cage was ripped out of my hands.

I fell backward into the churning water; when I surfaced, I could see the cage out in the mainstream, racing with the trees, bushes, and sides of buildings, heading on down the raging river. I looked for the last time at Sheba and Rona. They were looking at us quietly as if they knew, but their eyes begged for help. My tears joined the flood as my beloved friends were washed away.

By this time it had become clear to me what had happened. The floodgates on the dam had been opened, all right, but because the ground was already saturated with the thirty inches of rain that had fallen

in the last few weeks, it wouldn't absorb any more. At the same time, the new storm had hit, pouring down another fourteen inches in just twenty-four hours. Together, these conditions had caused the flood.

It was a larger flood than any that had been recorded in the area in the last hundred years, and it was made worse because the water had been held up occasionally on its fifteen-mile journey down the canyon by debris in its path. When suddenly released, the water that had built up behind the naturally formed logjams⁹ doubled in force. By the time it reached us, huge waves had been built up: The water and debris came crashing down on us like a wall, then subsided, only to come crashing down again. We were to struggle through two days and nights of unbelievable havoc and terror, trying desperately to salvage what we could of the ranch.

The storm grew worse. Heavy sheets of rain filled and overflowed our flood channel, undermining its sides until they caved in. By midmorning the Santa Clarita had become a raging, murderous torrent, 150 feet wide and 15 feet deep, moving

9. A *logjam* (LOG jam) is a pileup or tangle of logs in a river that keeps the water from flowing freely.

WORD BANK

fumbling (FUM bling) *v.*: feeling or groping about clumsily
saturated (SATCH uh RAYT ed) *v.*: thoroughly soaked with moisture
debris (dih BREE) *n.*: the remains of anything destroyed; ruins; rubble
havoc (HAV uk) *n.*: devastation and destruction; confusion and disorder
salvage (SAL vij) *v.*: save from destruction or danger

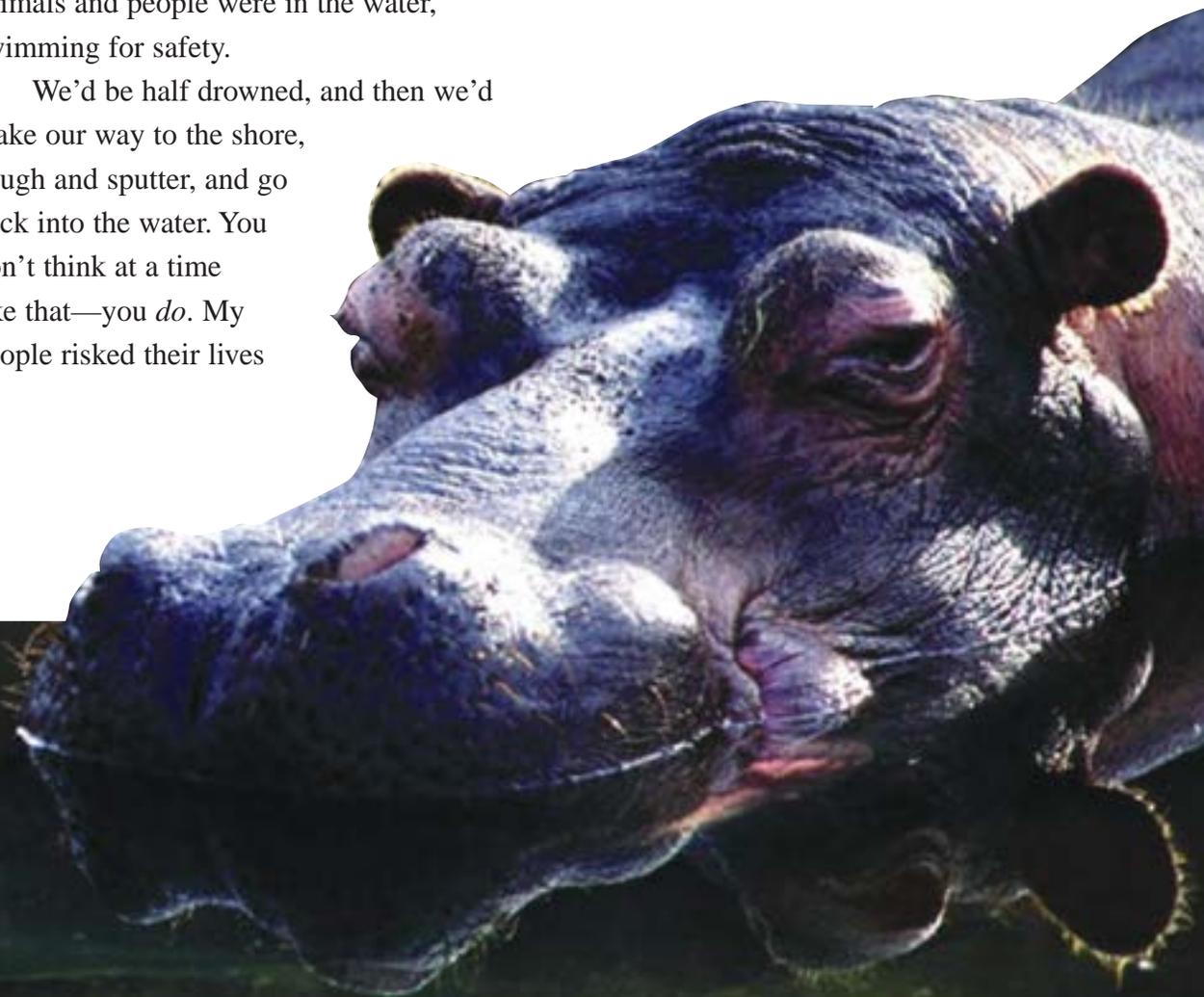
through Africa U.S.A. with the speed and force of an express train. In its fury it wiped out a two-lane highway, full-grown oak trees, generator buildings¹⁰—everything. Our sound stage was in a full-sized building, 100 feet long by 50 feet wide, but the water just picked it up like a matchbox and carried it away downstream, end over end, rolling it like a toy and depositing it on a sand embankment a mile away. Electric wires flared brightly as the water hit them. We rushed for the main switch to the sound stage, shutting everything down for fear of someone being electrocuted. Everywhere, animals and people were in the water, swimming for safety.

We'd be half drowned, and then we'd make our way to the shore, cough and sputter, and go back into the water. You don't think at a time like that—you *do*. My people risked their lives

over and over again for the animals.

The waves next hit the elephant pens, hard. We moved the elephants out as the building collapsed and was carried downstream. Then the waves caught the camels' cage, pulling it into the water. One huge camel was turning over and over as he was swept along. (I thought at the time that somewhere, someday, if that animal drowned, some archaeologist would dig up its bones and say, "There must have been camels in Los Angeles!")

10. Generators, machines that produce electricity, are housed in *generator* (JEN uh RAYT ur) *buildings*.



We worked frenziedly. Bears, lions, and tigers were jumping out of their cages and immediately being swept downstream. Others were hanging onto our legs and pulling us under, or we were hanging onto them and swimming for shore. I unlocked the cheetah's cage and he sprang out over my head, right into the water, and was gone. Animals were everywhere.

I remember grabbing hold of a mature tiger as he came out of his cage. He carried me on his back to temporary security on the opposite bank as smoothly as if we'd rehearsed it.

Another time I found myself being carried downstream with Zamba, Jr., who was caught in the same whirlpool that I was. I grabbed his mane, and together we swam for the safety of the shore. After resting a bit, I managed to get back to the main area, leaving the lion in as good a spot as any. At least for the moment he was safe.

As the storm rode on, the river was full of animals and people swimming together; there was no "kill" instinct in operation, only that of survival. Men were grabbing fistfuls of fur, clinging for life. A monkey grabbed a lion's tail, which allowed him to make it to safety.

Clarence the cross-eyed lion was in a state of panic. The river had surrounded him and was now flooding his cage. His

trainer, Bob, waded across the water, put a chain on Clarence, took him out of his cage, and attempted to jump across the raging stream with him. But the lion wouldn't jump. The water was rising rapidly. Bob threw part of the chain to me. To gain some leverage,¹¹ I grabbed a pipe that was running alongside a building. As we both pulled, Clarence finally jumped, and just then the pipe I was holding onto came loose. It turned out to be a "hot" electric conduit, for when Clarence leaped and the pipe came loose, we all got a tremendous electric shock! Fortunately, the pipe also pulled the wires loose, so the shock only lasted for an instant. Had it continued, it would certainly have killed us, as we were standing knee-deep in water.

We noticed a group of monkeys trapped in a small outcropping¹² of dirt and debris in the middle of the river. Frank almost died trying to save them: He tied a rope around his waist and started across, but about halfway over he slipped and went under. We didn't know whether to pull on the rope or not. We finally saw him in

11. To gain *leverage* (LEV uh rij) is to gain some advantage over a competitor or over a difficult situation.

12. An *outcropping* is a small part of a riverbed which, because it has been heaped with dirt and branches, now shows above the surface of the river.

WORD BANK

frenziedly (FREN zeed lee) *adv.*: wildly; excitedly; frantically

raging (RAYJ ing) *adj.*: rushing; surging furiously

conduit (KON doo it) *n.*: a pipe, tube, or natural channel for conveying water or other fluids; a pipe used to run electrical wires

midstream, trying to stay afloat. Whenever we pulled on the rope, he would go under. (We found out later that the rope had become tangled around his foot, and every time we yanked it, we were pulling him under!) But he made it, thank G-d, and he was able to swim the animals to safety.

We were racing against time. The river was still rising, piling up roots and

buildings and pushing them along in front, forming a wall of destruction. The shouts of half-drowned men and the screams of drowning animals filled the air, along with thunder and lightning and the ever-increasing downpour of rain.

Throughout the turmoil and strife one thing was crystal clear to me, and that is that without affection training, all would have been lost. It was extraordinary. As dangerous and frightening as the emergency was, these animals remained calm enough to let themselves be led to safety when it was possible for us to do so.

Imagine yourself in a raging storm, with buildings crashing alongside of you. You make your way to a cage that houses a lion or a tiger, and the animal immediately understands why you're there and is happy to see you. You open the door, put a leash on the animal, and you both jump out into the freezing, swirling water. Together, you're swept down the stream, hitting logs, rolling over and over, as you try to keep your arms around the animal. Together, you get up onto the safety of dry land. You dry off, give your animal a big hug, and then go back in for another one.

There was one big cage left in the back section containing a lion. This lion was a killer who had been fear-trained rather than affection-trained. We went out



**WORD
BANK**

turmoil (TUR moy il) *n.*: state of great commotion, confusion, or disturbance

strife (STRYF) *n.*: violent or bitter conflict; (*archaic*, as used here) strenuous effort

to him. The other lions were being saved because we could swim with them, but this fellow was too rough. I got to the cage and opened the door. A couple of my men threw ropes on the lion and pulled, trying to get him out of his potential grave—but he wouldn't come out. He was petrified! We pulled and struggled and fought to get him out of the cage, but we couldn't do it, and we finally had to let him go.

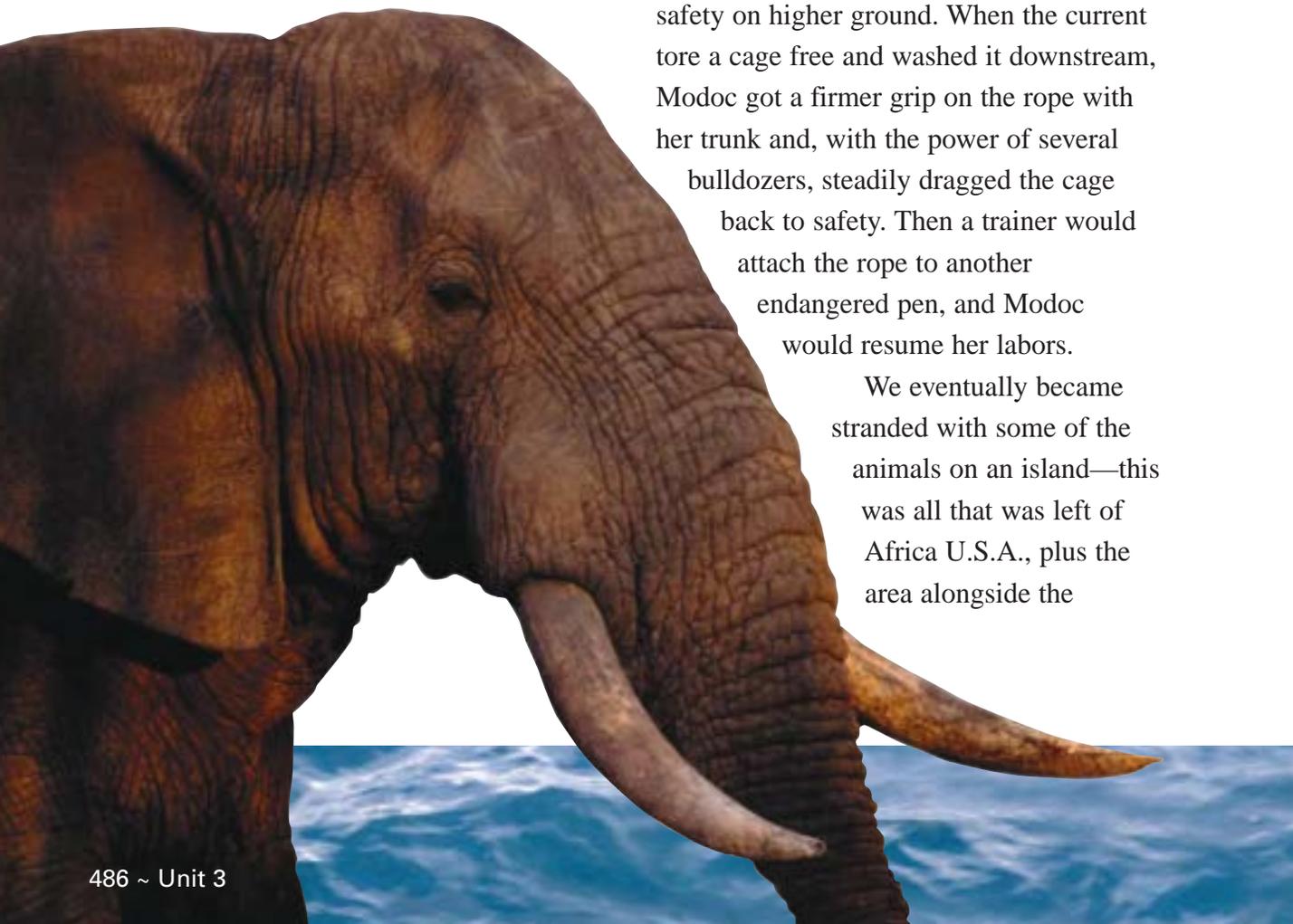
Then the “wild string” panicked, and in their hysteria they attacked their rescuers as if they were enemies. In the end, we had to resort to tranquilizer guns. We fired darts into each fear-trained animal, and as they succumbed to the medication, we held their bodies up above the water and carried

them to safety. Tragically, there was not enough time to drag all of them to safety; several drowned in their drugged sleep before we could reach them.

The storm continued on into the night, and with the darkness came a nightmare of confusion. We worked on without sleep, sustained by coffee and desperation.

During that first night, it became clear that ancient Modoc, the elephant, the one-eyed wonder of the big top, had by no means outlived her capacity for calmness and courage in the face of disaster. Modoc took over, understanding fully what was at stake and what was required of her. Animal after animal was saved as she labored at the water's edge, hauling their cages to safety on higher ground. When the current tore a cage free and washed it downstream, Modoc got a firmer grip on the rope with her trunk and, with the power of several bulldozers, steadily dragged the cage back to safety. Then a trainer would attach the rope to another endangered pen, and Modoc would resume her labors.

We eventually became stranded with some of the animals on an island—this was all that was left of Africa U.S.A., plus the area alongside the



railroad track. When the dam had burst upstream, the wall of water that hit the ranch divided into two fast-moving rivers. As time passed, the rivers widened and deepened until they were impossible to cross. As dusk fell on the second day, we realized that we were cut off from the mainland. Since it was the highest ground on the ranch, the island in the center had become the haven for all the survivors. The office building, the vehicles, and about twenty cages were all well above the flooded zone and so were safe for the time being. The giraffes, some monkeys, and one lion were all housed in makeshift cages on the island. We all hoped the water would not rise any further.

Behind the office building ran a railroad track. By following the tracks for three miles, it would be possible to reach the highway. The problem would then be in crossing the torrent of water to get to the road.

I noticed that Bullfrog, our thousand-pound Indian buffalo, was gone. Buffaloes are known to be excellent swimmers. Surely *he* could survive! I asked around to see whether anyone had seen him. No one had. Bullfrog's cage had been at the entrance to the ranch, because he always greeted visitors with the most unusual bellow that sounded exactly like the word

“Hi.” Now he was gone, too. Would it ever end? I felt weak. The temperature had dropped, and the wind had come up. The windchill factor was now thirty degrees below zero.

There's something horrible about tragedy that occurs in the dark. I could hear the water running behind me, and every once in a while I'd hear a big timber¹³ go, or an animal cry, or a person shouting. It all seemed very unreal.

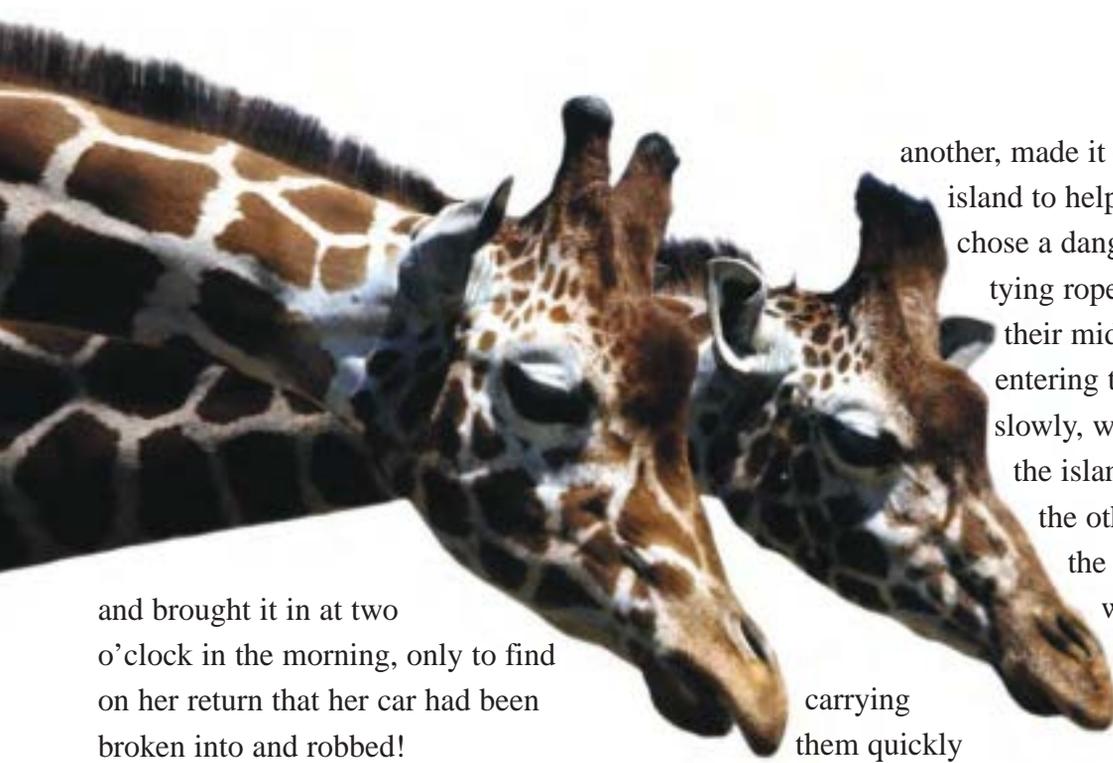
Throughout the night and all the next day the rain continued, and we worked on. Luckily, help came from everywhere. The highway, which we could no longer get to but which we could see, was lined with cars. Some people had successfully rigged up a *bo's'n chair*¹⁴ 50 feet in the air and were sending hot food and drink over to us, a distance of some 200 yards. Other people were walking three miles over the hills to bring supplies. Radio communication was set up by a citizens'-band club. Gardner McKay, the actor and a true friend, put his Mercedes on the track, deflated the tires, and slowly drove down to help us. One elderly woman prepared meat and coffee

13. The word “timber” can mean either wood or the tree itself. In this case, a *big timber* (TIM bur) is a big tree.

14. A *bo's'n chair* (BOSE un CHAIR) is a worker's wooden or canvas chair that is hung by ropes over the side of a ship or building.

WORD BANK

potential (puh TEN chul) *adj.*: capable of being or becoming
succumbed (suh KUMD) *v.*: gave way to superior force; yielded
capacity (kuh PASS ih tee) *n.*: actual or potential ability
haven (HAY vun) *n.*: any place of shelter and safety
deflated (dih FLAYT ed) *v.*: released the air or gas from something



and brought it in at two o'clock in the morning, only to find on her return that her car had been broken into and robbed!

Then a train engine came down the track to help (just an engine—no cars). Three girls from the affection-training school volunteered to rescue the snakes. The girls climbed onto the cowcatcher¹⁵ on the front of the engine. We then wrapped about thirty feet of pythons and boa constrictors around their shoulders and told them where to take the snakes once they were on the other side. (There was, of course, no more electricity in the reptile and nursery area, and unless we could get the reptiles to some heat, they would surely die.) Goats, aoudads,¹⁶ and llamas all rode in the coal bin behind the engine. I'll never forget the look on one girl's face as the engine pulled out and a python crawled through her hair.

By four the next morning, some twenty people had, by one method or

another, made it over to our island to help. Some chose a dangerous way, tying ropes around their middles and entering the water slowly, with those on the island holding the other ends of the ropes. Then, with the current

carrying them quickly

downstream, they would look for a logjam or boulder to stop them so they could make their way to where we were.

I was having some coffee in the watchmen's trailer when the scream of an animal shattered the night. I dashed out to find a small group of people huddled together, trying to shine their flashlights on the animal who was out there in the dark, desperately struggling in the raging water. It had succeeded in swimming out of the turbulence in the middle of the stream, but the sides of the river were too slippery for it to get a foothold and climb to safety. In the dark, I couldn't make out which animal

15. Trains were once equipped with *cowcatchers*, or triangular frames, at the front of the locomotive to clear the tracks of obstructions.

16. An *aoudad* (AH oo DAD) is a wild sheep with a long fringe of hair on the throat, chest, and forelegs. It also is called a Barbary sheep.

WORD BANK

turbulence (TER byuh lentz) *n.*: violent commotion or disturbance

it was. Then I heard it: “Hi! Hi!” It was a call of desperation from Bullfrog, the buffalo, as he fought for his life. There was nothing we could do to help him, and his “Hi’s” trailed down the dark, black abyss, fading as he was carried away around the bend.

Then Toni screamed at me in the dark, “Ralph, over here!” I fought my way through a maze of debris and water and burst into a clearing. There was Toni, holding a flashlight on—lo and behold—a big steel cage from Beverly Hills! It had been washed downstream and was lodged in the trunk of a toppled tree. It was still upright, but its back was facing us, and we couldn’t see inside. We waded out to the cage. Toni kept calling, “Sheba, Rona, are you there? Please answer!” Our hearts were beating fast, and Toni was crying.

Hoping against hope that the wolves were still alive, we rounded the corner, half swimming, half falling. Then we eased up to the front of the cage and looked straight into two sets of the most beautiful eyes I’d ever seen. Rona and Sheba had survived! They practically jumped out of their skins when they saw us, as though to say, “Is it really *you*?” Toni had her key, and we unlocked the door. Both wolves fell all over us, knocking us into the water. They couldn’t seem to stop licking our faces and whimpering. Thank G-d, at least *they* were safe!

The rain finally let up on the morning of the third day. The sun came out, and at last we had time to stop, look around, and assess the damage. It was devastating, and heartrending.

Most of the animals had been let out of their cages and had totally disappeared, including Judy, Clarence, Pajama Tops, the zebra, and Raunchy, our star jaguar. We knew a few others had definitely drowned. Both rhinos were missing, and so were the hippos. Our beloved Gentle Ben had been washed away, along with hundreds of other animals.



WORD BANK

assess (uh SESS) *v.*: determine the amount of

devastating (DEV uh sthayt ing) *v.*:
overwhelming; heartbreaking

I was sitting there looking at the wreckage when somebody put a cup of hot chocolate in my hand. It was Toni. She stood before me, as exhausted as I was, clothes torn and wet, hair astray, cold and shivering. Earlier, she had managed to make her way to the Africa U.S.A. nursery, where all of the baby animals were quartered. Without exception, the babies had all followed her to safety. Not one baby animal had been lost.

The hot liquid felt good going down. The sun was just topping the cottonwoods.¹⁷ The river had subsided. All was quiet, except for an occasional animal noise: a yelp, a growl, a snort. All of the animals were happy to see the sun, to feel its warmth.

Toni and I felt only the heavy, leaden feeling of loss. Ten years were, literally, down the drain. We had just signed a contract with Universal Studios to open our beautiful ranch to their tours; this would now be impossible. A million dollars was gone, maybe more. But what was far worse was the loss of some of our beloved animals.

We hiked to a ridge above the railroad track. Something caught my eye, and as we came near an outcrop of trees where we could have a better view, we looked over. There, on top of a nearby hill, we saw an incredible sight. Lying under the tree was

Zamba, and at his feet, resting, were a multitude of animals. Deer, bears, tigers, llamas, all lying together peacefully. The animals must have fought their way clear of the treacherous waters and, together, climbed the hill, slept, and then dried off in the morning sun. They hadn't run away. In fact, they seemed to be waiting for our next move. It was as though G-d had caused the flood to make me realize how powerful affection training is, how deep it had gone. The lamb could truly lie down with the lion, without fear, and could do it by choice!

We called Zam over to us and smothered him with hugs and kisses. As we climbed down to the ranch, the other animals joined us. Camels, giraffes, eland¹⁸—all came along as we wound our way down.

So many people were there at the ranch! We were once again connected with the rest of the world. Exhausted, wet, wonderful people—true animal lovers. They had come from everywhere. Some were employees, some friends, some strangers. All greeted us as we came down the hill. Their faces expressed hope and love. They cared . . . and it showed.

17. *Cottonwoods* are tall poplar trees that derive their name from the cottony tufts on their seeds.

18. An *eland* (EE lund) is an antelope with long, twisted horns.

WORD BANK

subsided (sub SYD ed) *v.*: sank to a lower level; became quiet, less active, or less violent
multitude (MULL tuh tood) *n.*: a large number of something
treacherous (TRECH uh rus) *adj.*: dangerous

We took the animals one by one and fed, cleaned, and housed them as best we could.

“Ralph, come quickly!” screamed a voice. “He made it, he made it! *He’s alive!*”

“Who, who?” I screamed, and was met by a resounding “Hi, Hi!” From around the corner came Bullfrog—disheveled¹⁹ and muddy, but alive!

“Hi, hi!”

Yes, *hi*, you big, lovable . . . hi! hi!

We began searching for the animals that were still lost. The ranch was a network of people and animals working together on the massive cleanup effort. Animals were straining to pull big trucks out of the water and muck. Bakery trucks were coming by with stale bread for the elephants. Farmers loaned us their skip loaders²⁰ to round up the hippos and rhinos. (One hippo fell in love with the skip-loader bucket and coyly²¹ followed it home!) Charley and Madeline Franks, two loyal helpers, kept hot chili coming and must have dished out hundreds of meals. People from the Humane Society, Fish and Game, Animal Regulation, and the SPCA (Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) all helped to comfort and tend the animals.

Everyone was busy constructing makeshift cages. The medical-lab trailer was pulled out of the mud. The nursery

building and all of its kitchen storage area had been completely submerged, and some of it had been washed away. However, what could be salvaged was taken up to the island for immediate use.

Outside the ranch, the animals began turning up everywhere. Elephants showed up in people’s backyards. Eagles sat in the limbs of trees. Llamas and guanacos²² cruised the local restaurants and were seen

19. To be *disheveled* (dish EV uld) is to be unkempt, untidy, or messy.

20. A *skip loader* is a light tractor with both a compartment for front-loading and a backhoe for digging.

21. To be *coy* is to show only some of the affection that one feels and to hide the rest, either out of shyness or insincerity.

22. *Guanacos* (gwah NAHK oz) are relatives of the llama, the alpaca, and the camel.



WORD
BANK

makeshift (MAYK shift)
n.: a temporary substitute
for something

in parking lots. There was no difficulty between animals and people.

We had had dozens of alligators, some weighing two hundred to three hundred pounds. The whole pen had been hit by the water; we lost most of them because the water was ice-cold, and it battered and beat them. For seven months afterward we'd read in the paper that the bodies of alligators were being found everywhere, up to forty-five miles away. There were helicopter and airplane photos of alligators that had been killed, their bodies lying in the sand as the water subsided.

Of 1,500 other animals, only nine had drowned. Five of these were animals that had not been affection-trained.

Only one animal remained lost and unaccounted for, and that was old Gentle Ben. I had last seen him being swept sideways down the river. We didn't have much hope for him.

I was starting to feel the full shock of everything that had happened. True, by some miracle most of the animals were safe, but other losses had been enormous. As the emergency lessened and mopping-up²³ operations took over, I felt worse and worse. The shakes set in, and then I developed a high fever. The doctors said it was a walking pneumonia, and that rest, good food, and warmth were in order. But there were still too many things to do—now was not the time to stop. I did,

however, need to find a place to sit down and relax for a while.

As I sat on a log, my body trembled with shock as well as illness. In looking over the debris, it seemed to me that everything I had worked for was gone. The emotional pain, the sheer physical exhaustion, and the pneumonia had overloaded me. I just couldn't handle any more. I had no more tears, no pain of any kind. I was numb. I sat in the middle of the chaos with an old blanket wrapped around me, unmoving, unable to give any more orders.

I had closed my eyes and was drifting off to sleep when something warm and wet on my face woke me up. I opened my eyes and saw Ben. *Gentle Ben had come home!!* I hugged him and cried like a big kid. I turned to get up to tell everyone, but I didn't have to. They were all there. Toni, joined by the rest, had brought him to me. He'd been found two miles down the canyon, mud-covered and a few pounds lighter, but safe! Tears were in everybody's eyes—and if you looked closely, it seemed that even old Ben had a few.

A beautiful rainbow arched its brilliant colors across the ravaged countryside, then was gone.

23. In a situation where a lot of damage has been done, repairing the damage is a big job. The task of applying the finishing touches needed to bring the situation back to normal is called *mopping up*.





ABOUT THE AUTHOR

RALPH HELFER was born in 1931. He began his career as a stuntman, wrestling with lions, tigers, and bears. Gradually, he developed a method of affection training, using patience, respect, and affection to train animals to perform. For many years, he owned and operated the largest animal rental company in the world. Mr. Helfer now spends most of his time in Kenya, where he leads photography safaris and works with organizations that protect animals in the wild.

Studying the Selection

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

What moment in the story was most exciting for you?

QUICK REVIEW

1. Where was Ralph Helfer's ranch located?
2. Why is Mr. Helfer a little concerned after he leaves the rhinos?
3. What causes the flood?
4. Which group of animals is brought to safety with fewest losses?
Which group of animals suffers the greatest losses?



FOCUS

1. Think of the most emotional event you have experienced. Close your eyes and move through the experience in your mind's eye. Now create a table with five columns. Label each column with one of the five senses: Sight, Sound, Taste, Touch, and Smell. Remember that touch refers to any physical sensation. Now, go back to your memory. Give yourself as much time as you need to make your list of images.
2. Use the event you remembered for #1. From that memory choose two incidents that are examples of cause and effect. Describe the events and how they are linked.
3. Work with a partner to come up with a setting that could be part of a conflict. A massive mudslide and a volcanic eruption are two good examples. Now write a three-paragraph narrative using your setting.

CREATING AND WRITING

1. Natural disasters are common. Some examples are earthquakes, tornadoes, forest fires, volcanic eruptions, and tidal waves. Choose one and write a one-page report about it.
2. Find out about animal training. Information is available at the library, or you can request help from a veterinarian, a local chapter of the Humane Society or Animal Protective League, or a local nature center. Here are some questions to ask: Which animals are most easily trained? Which are most difficult to train? Which animals may benefit from training? Which animals may suffer? Which animals should simply be left alone in the wild? Present your findings to the class in an oral report.
3. Choose an image from Ralph Helfer's description of the flood and create a drawing of the scene.