



## A BILLIGIRI BISON

by CYRIL E. HOLLAND

ILLUSTRATED BY ROBERT DOARES

I'm British but I've spent most of my life in India, where my father came as a young man with the British army. I learned one or two of the local dialects at an early age, made pals with local shikaris (hunters), and began tramping the jungles at the age of 13 or 14. For the past 20 years I've been in the Madras area, the hilly coastal province that tea and coffee planters share with elephants, bison, tigers, and bears.

In describing this region, one of the early settlers wrote, "No articles of food, no roads, no police, no law, labor imported and often scared away by the solitariness of the place and an ill-defined fear of the unknown."

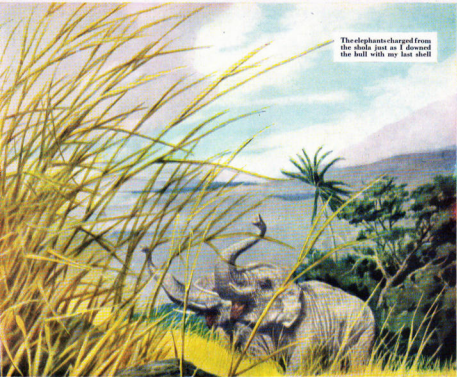
Looking around me now in the first light of dawn I could

I had a wounded gaur on one side, two rogue elephants on the other, and no place to go

understand how a pioneering planter might have felt that way. I was sitting in a jeep deep in the jungle between the Nilgiris (blue hills) and the Billigirirungans (white-rock hills). I was happy and yet I wasn't comfortable, for I was going after bison in a rogue-elephant range and I'd broken my own hard-and-fast rule.

A planter, one of the oldest and best, had let me have his jeep, his driver, and his shikari. And at his insistence—I had also taken his gun. It was a 12-gauge Explora rifled for several inches at the muzzle end of its double barrels, a compromise designed to handle either shotgun pellets or solid bullets. It was this gun that bothered me. I knew the owner had accounted for tigers,

The elephants charged from the shola just as I downed the bull with my last shell



bison, panthers, and bears with it, but I was unhappy about having left my own .404 Mauser at home. That was the rule I'd broken. I had my .375 Mannlicher-Schoenauer along as an extra, but neither this nor the shotgun quite satisfied me for the job at hand.

In another 15 minutes or so it would be light enough to drive the final mile to where we expected to meet up with the bison. I could hear the low murmur of Arumugam (six faces) the driver and Mathan the shikari. Arumugam was a low-caste convert. He'd eat anything, do any menial job. Dressed as he was in khaki shirt, slacks, and shoes, he'd got on in life. Mathan was a Sholegar, a man born and bred in the jungle. He didn't eat beef, which included bison, and his dress was a loincloth which he'd made as dirty as possible as soon as possible so that he would look inconspicuous to the elephants and bears, his chief fears.

Ordinarily Mathan looked down on Arumugam from the Himalayan heights of caste and Arumugam, in turn, considered the Sholegar a sort of wild man. At the moment, however, mutual respect for the early-morning jungle promoted a sort of comradeship.

I knew what they were discussing—the elephant sign we'd seen for the last two miles. Young trees broken, fresh green leaves dropped along the track, and lots of other

things. The shikari was probably now telling the driver, for the sixth time, of the two Sholegars who had been killed a few weeks before, of the woman before them, and the bullock cart, on its way to the plains, which had been overturned. A little more of this and Arumugam would consider it worth while to turn all six faces homeward.

I grunted "Mathan" and they came around to the front of the jeep. Just to change the subject, I asked Mathan who were the first dwellers in these parts. (I'd heard the story dozens of times before.)

He answered in Kanarese, the language of Mysore: "Little men, dorai (sir). If you look carefully on the sides of the hills you'll see signs of the walls they built around their villages. They were so small they used to ride on hares."

By the time the story was finished it was light enough to go on. I got out of the jeep and walked up the fire line we were on. I soon found a good, clear footprint of an elephant. Closing my fists and extending my thumbs at right angles to my wrists, I placed the tips of my thumbs together and measured across the print. I made the animal to be nine feet eight inches tall at the shoulder. (Twice the circumference of an elephant's forefoot is its height at the shoulder. An elephant's age, incidentally, can be told by the amount of turn-down on the (continued on page 95)

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top of its ear—approximately one inch for each 20 years. A closer study showed there were two elephants, one walking in the other's tracks.

I came back and said, "Two elephants."

"Then there's no doubt," Mathan said. "The rogue sometimes goes around with a smaller tusker as bad as himself."

I felt even more unhappy now over leaving my .404 up at the estate bungalow miles away, but decided to drive ahead along what, for lack of a better name, I'll call a track. I now had the .375 across my knees, loaded with five cartridges with solid (full metal case) bullets. It was light armament for big, dangerous game, but at least I knew what it would do. I told Arumugam to drive slowly and not take the corners short. We didn't want to bump into the bottom of a rogue elephant.

We were in a valley from which other valleys took off. Here and there were sholas (woods) some covering a square mile, others as small as a tennis court. Between the sholas was grassland. The hills rise nearly 1,000 feet above the valley floor, which is more than 4,000 feet in altitude. It's typical highland country. Many people say it resembles Scotland, others Dorset, in England. Someone has always seen a place "just like this." The climate, anyway, is like southern Italy. To me, with the sun just beginning to breathe on the higher peaks, it looked good.

About a quarter of a mile up we saw a sambar stag on the edge of a shola, a medium stag with horns about 33 inches from burr to tip and the usual three tines on each side. Mathan saw it as about 500 pounds of meat and looked at me. I shook my head.

India is not like Africa, where one sees hundreds of head of game. You might go out here and see nothing. On the other hand you might, as I once did, see a tiger, a panther and cub, and four sambars in one patch of bush.

After another half mile, Mathan said this was where we stopped. Like car drivers the world over, Arumugam, here in this vast open space, had to pick a good place to park. He found one near the edge of a small shola and was just going to switch off the engine when I told him to turn the jeep and face back home. It's a habit of mine, ever since the day I was chased to my vehicle by an old cow elephant and found it facing the wrong way.

We were unloading when the shikari touched me on the arm and nodded at a bison walking out of the shola. He was a "solitary," big in body but with smallish horns, perhaps a 33-inch spread at their widest point. I say big in body—he probably went all of 18 hands, say six feet four inches at the shoulder.

The books will tell you these are gaur, not bison. Bison is the local name. Sometimes they're aggressive; mostly they're not. Yet I know of a case where one of these brutes charged a man and ran its horn into his back, breaking some ribs and puncturing his

lung. (He lived.) Again I shook my head at Mathan and let the bison wander off.

Mathan hitched up his loincloth and I put on my cartridge belt with four big brass shells for the Explora and three soft-nose loads for the .375 in the loops, and with the driver carrying a water bottle we three walked up a small rise. From the top we saw more bison, a herd of eight or nine about a mile away, and over on our right a lone animal grazing up to one of the saddles of the hills.

"Wontie," Mathan said, but I al-



**A**uthor Cyril E. Holland relaxes above on the back of the Billigiri Bison (a gaur) that stalked him in the accompanying story.

Holland calls England "home," using the quotation marks, but he grew up in India and still lives and works there. By the time he moved to Madras at the age of 21, he was so much a native son that he was asked to captain one of the top Indian hockey teams there—probably the first European to do so.

Now, after years of Indian hunting, Holland seldom goes after anything but a killer or troublemaker. He's an honorary adviser to the State Zoological Gardens, where he walks in and out of the panther and rhino cages on his visits. Some time ago he was reprimanded for leading lion and tiger cubs into his social club. He has raised such cubs, including two hyenas, in his bungalow.

Holland earns his living as a director of an exporting-importing firm, fills in for the Belgian consul when that official is away, and makes a hobby of studying elephants. When there's a rogue on a rampage, he likes to have his .404 Mauser rifle with him as he investigates.

ready knew it was a "solitary" and I too said the obvious, "doth kombu," for we could all see the "big horns."

Telling Arumugam to stay where he was, I set off with Mathan on the stalk, he carrying the .375 and I the Explora. Using the folds in the ground, we soon covered the quarter mile which separated us and found the bull unsuspecting but feeding quite fast up the hill. I wanted to get within 40 yards, and by the time I did he was just going over the ridge. His white stockings

were already behind the brow and more and more of his body was disappearing when I fired.

The big brass-pointed lump of lead took some time in the air before I heard it whack into the bison. It reminded me of testing my air rifle in boyhood—firing it against the garage door and judging by the time lag whether it needed a new washer. That big, lumbering Express bullet would have set me searching for my washers.

The bull disappeared, and Mathan and I looked at each other and then climbed a higher point on the saddle and looked over. No bull. Just over the saddle was a big, triangular shola. The trees in it ran down on our right for perhaps 300 yards to a base about the same length. Just inside the trees was a game track where we found fresh, unhurried bison prints.

"What the hell," I said, and Mathan spat out his tobacco wad in disgust.

We set off along the tracks and presently came out on the other side of the shola. In front of us was a mile of wide-open country with not a thing in sight, and again I said "What the hell."

**T**hese Sholegar boys can track, I knew from experience, but this time my shikari was fooled. He was casting around when out walked the wounded bull 50 yards away and below us. We'd followed a track made by another solitary a few hours earlier.

I was determined to give the Explora a fair try, so I gave the bison both barrels and over he went. Loading up, I walked down toward him. He'd fallen into a fold in the ground where I couldn't see him. Before I got there I heard him get up and run. I wasn't used to this at all. I'd shot numerous bison, mostly three-quarter-front shots into the base of the neck with my .404, and they'd never moved. I knew now I was in for a tough time. When a powerful animal survives the first shock of lead he generally keeps going—or keeps coming—for a long time.

I thought of Mathan's young wife and told him to go back to the jeep. He said he'd be all right, but I told him the bison wasn't all right and ushered him off the premises. I took the .375 loaded with five solid-bullet cartridges, tucked three soft-noses in my belt, and went after the bull. I caught him trying to back-track me and got in three rounds from the .375. He turned and went on down the hill. I bunged in the lead tips of the three soft-noses and placed them in the magazine beneath my last two solids.

This bull had to be walking from sheer will power by now, about three parts dead, and I knew that this was the time to be doubly careful. He was trying to get above and behind me, but I intended to keep the advantage. I recalled that a friend of mine, who'd spent his life in the jungle, recently put 16 rounds from a .450/400 into a bison and it charged him at the 15th.

I went down after the bull, and came on him in range on the steep hillside—which made it all the more difficult to put in a fatal shot. He staggered with each of the next three rounds. As he

checked his downward plunge for an instant, I gave him a fourth. The next second he was lost to view.

I went down to where he'd been standing, but he wasn't there; he'd got into a patch of head-high lemon grass. I knew this was his last effort—he was waiting for me to step into the grass. This patch, about 40 yards in diameter, separated the shola we'd just come through from a similar one running farther down the hill. If it was going to be a waiting game, I was thinking I could wait all day. Then I heard the roar of an elephant.

I had forgotten all about the rogues but now realized they were in the lower shola—100 yards away and very angry at the firing. What's more, they were coming up. The bison was waiting for me somewhere in the grass; behind me was a very steep hillside, and I was already exhausted. All I had in my favor was the wind. A cold breeze chilling the sweat on my face told me the wind was blowing from the elephants and the bison to me.

I turned to look at the hill behind me and looked right into the bull's face. His blue eyes, a color many taxidermists overlook, held mine. I forgot the elephants, forgot the one and only cartridge left in my rifle. Shooting by reflex, I hit him smack between the eyes, and he dropped as though he'd run into a V-2 rocket bomb.

Later I found he'd been hit from seven paces away. The 270-grain soft-nose had acted like a depth charge between his forehead and his shoulders. In spite of its success, I hope I don't have to try this particular combination again.

All this time the elephants were coming up fast. They rushed out of the shola as I fired, and I just had time to dive into the grass head first. Automatically I plugged a lump of mud over the muzzle of the rifle to keep other matter out of the barrel, and tried to squeeze my five-foot nine-inch frame into three feet of cover. I felt like a giant with huge feet.

**W**hen people buy elephants after a keddah operation (a method of capturing wild elephants by driving) they avoid a long-legged, short-tailed, small-headed, round-backed beast. Those are generally mean. My first glance at the bigger bull showed me he was all of this, and I'd have bet he had halitosis as well!

The two elephants, from what I could now gather, were churning up the grass in their search. I could also hear trees being pushed over. What would I do if they found me?—Run for my life downhill and avoid anything thorny? My mind was quite active—too much so. I remembered a man who was brought into Coimbatore after being killed by an elephant. His two friends found the best way to carry him was to run a bamboo pole through the hole in his chest and hoist him up. The sweat broke out afresh at this gruesome thought. If I had a blanket I could drop it as I ran. That had worked once, creating a distraction that allowed me to reload. That particular

elephant's foot was now serving as a bottle container.

I heard an elephant's belly rumbling. I wondered what my five cocker dogs would have done had they been here. Elephants don't usually like dogs. But they weren't here and, besides, that big, golden ass Gunner probably would have yapped and then run back to sit in my lap. How long I sweated it out, I can't say. It was too long, especially when one of them got within 8 or 10 yards of me.

**I**t came to an end in an unexpected way. I heard the rogues beating the shola on my right, hunting for me downhill and getting farther away. After they'd got a quarter of a mile away I stood up. I felt an urge to run but I was afraid I'd run blindly, so I sat on a log and took off my hot, wet shirt. With sweat pouring off my face, I reached into my pocket for my handkerchief and discovered my breakfast. Generally a helper carries a hunter's breakfast in India, but on this occasion I'd put a hard-boiled egg into my pocket together with an envelope containing lemonade crystals from a K-ration packet. The egg and crystals now made a fearful mess.

I was contemplating this mixture when I heard a deep rumbling approaching. I went headfirst into the grass again, calling myself all kinds of a clot for not getting out when I had the chance. Slowly the rumbling increased and a dark shadow swept over me. Sheepishly, I got up and waved, for it was the Air India plane on its daily run, now halfway between Bangalore and Coimbatore. I knew that my fiancée was aboard it as hostess. Shortly after she'd stopped flying to take on the far more troublesome job of keeping home and hearth for me, the same plane crashed near this very spot with all lives lost. It took five days for the wreckage to be found, and the search parties were constantly harassed by elephants.

I got out of there then and drove back at 4:30 that evening with Mathan and three or four of his pals. This time I had my big .404 across my knees, alert for the rogues while my helpers removed the lion's head and Arumugam took a hunk of meat. I heard the elephants trumpeting but they never came near. We covered the carcass with grass and left just as darkness was falling.

The following morning a tracker was sent out and found that the elephants were then miles away, so the waiting estate coolies descended like bluebottle flies and 240 of them each had a lump of meat. I made no effort to weigh this ball, but others that were chopped up and weighed averaged around 2,300 pounds.

I sat that morning in the estate bungalow checking and oiling the .404 and trying to decide whether to go out first for the two rogues, to whom I owed a personal grudge, or to follow up the request I'd just received from the Forest Department. They wanted me to go out after a woman-eating tiger 400 miles away.