



I couldn't see to shoot at first. Then Colonel Granville flicked on the powerful light

THE DOUBLE PANTHER

By PETER I. HIRSCH

COL. S. A. H. GRANVILLE, shikari from Pachmarhi, India, sat in the back seat of the jeep holding a powerful night light of his own design which was attached to a car battery on the seat beside him. He had no little trouble in folding his six foot five frame into the cramped area, but managed to keep one hand free in order to flick on the light switch from time to time. When he did so, the powerful beam probed through the forest like a doctor's finger, reflecting eerily from the leaves and every so often bringing a sparkle from an animal's eyes. Unfortunately, the eyes belonged to nothing but bullocks or tame water buffaloes.

Seated next to the colonel in the back seat was his wife, Ada, bundled in a heavy sweater against the chill

I don't tell my game-room visitors about this cat. Here is why



Author, Peter Hirsch, is shown at left with a tiger shot on one of the many big-game hunts that led to his humorous, biting book about trophy hunting—a brisk seller titled *The Last Man in Paradise*, published by Doubleday & Company, Garden City, New York. Hirsch runs a bookstore in Kansas City to pay for hunting trips to the far places he reads about. "The Double Panther," a brand-new story, is his first magazine article.

THE DOUBLE PANTHER *continued*

of the February night. She maintained stoutly that when she went along, game was bound to be seen. She was there for luck.

I was seated in the front, nervously fingering my new .375 double rifle. This was its first trip anywhere and my first trip to India. I held the rifle against the seat cushion to postpone as long as possible that first heart-breaking scratch on the beautifully oiled stock.

Seated next to me was the slim and bearded Indian who drove the jeep as though he were neither familiar with its eccentricities (of which it had plenty) nor the abysmal condition of the ankle-deep-in-dust road, rutted from wear by the endless processions of bullock carts. This driver, whose name I've forgotten, drove fast over the bumps and ruts, then steered cautiously in second gear on the few smooth sections.

He most enjoyed encountering bullock carts on narrow trails, always a procession of from 10 to 30 of these cumbersome vehicles. Then and only then did the spirit of adventure surge through his veins. He would hurl the jeep at the bucking bullocks, his hand, the hand of progress and authority, pressed firmly on the horn. The bullocks twisted and jerked in fear, almost upsetting the carts. I was as frightened as they were.

At this moment, however, we were making a night reconnaissance, and there were few carts to contend with. We were in the Ladi block, Betul District of Madhya Pradesh—the Central Province of India. We might see either a tiger or a panther, and it's legal in India to shoot either of these two predators at night. An encounter with the cats was unlikely, but it was better than sitting in the Government Bungalow waiting for the scouts to report each morning that our baits, all six of them, had remained undisturbed throughout the night. As a matter of fact, the first word in Hindustani that I learned was the word for "nothing." It got monotonous.

Before I had left for India to hunt tigers, I rearranged the trophies on the wall of the game room at my home in Kansas City, Missouri. I left a blank panel between the turned heads of a pair of sable antelope. This space was to accommodate the head of a tiger, preferably snarling. With the optimism of all hunters, I didn't anticipate failure.

In looking over my trophies at home before I left, I was struck by the fact that each of the game rooms I'd visited had a favorite trophy and a story to go with it. The owner modestly tells the measurement of horn or hide (although I've never noticed a tape measure handy for immediate confirmation) and describes the hunt and kill.

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The panther was in plain view for me, and I reached for my rifle. Again the Colonel's hand restrained me. What was he waiting for?



DOUBLE PANTHER

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I tell my favorite stories just as the other hunters do, but there's one I omit—the story of the "double" panther of Ladi. There's a good reason for this: his hide is not on the wall, nor is it on the floor; it is nowhere in my house. It is still, as far as I know, comfortably on the panther. O cruel fate!

Col. S. A. H. Granville (I don't know why it is that English professional hunters seem almost invariably to have three given names, but frankly it gives me greater confidence in their ability) had chosen two shooting areas, called blocks, for the hunt that led to the double-panther incident. Neither block had been hunted for at least five years and there was no record of a tiger being killed in either block since the British had left in 1947. Granville was a conscientious shikari and anxious to see that his clients were satisfied, and I must admit that despite the panther affair he more than satisfied me. I eventually took a tiger out of each block, one of them a famous man-killer for which deed I received a reward from the Indian Government in the amount of 100 rupees—about \$21 American. The second tiger was taken after I'd wounded it in a beat and was forced to track it on foot for three days through the jungle. But that's another story.

This story begins on that very night when Colonel Granville, his wife, the thin jeep driver, and I were bumping down that dusty Indian road. It was then that I first saw the famous double panther of Ladi. The moon was nearly full—a panther's moon—and the hills and forest were yellow-gray in its unearthly light. We'd just driven through a cluster of woven rattan bungalows, quiet and peaceful except for the jerkings of the tethered bullocks and buffaloes that found our jeep unfamiliar and disturbing. Now we were in open country except for one last hut to the right of the road.

As we passed this last dwelling, situated a few hundred yards past the others, I thought I saw a movement

among the rocks of a broad field. I grabbed the driver's arm as a signal to stop, but he was too engrossed with his driving and continued down the road. I pulled harder on his arm and hissed menacingly. He finally got the message and applied the brakes with such determination I was nearly flung head first from my seat.

In the pale light was a huge panther standing motionless in the field. I raised my rifle, trying to pick up his elusive form in the scope, but I couldn't find him. The panther broke for cover near the top of a rise, twisting and dodging among the rocks.

Col. Granville flicked on his lamp and flooded the field with light. The panther was nowhere to be seen, but I was sure he hadn't cleared the hill. He had to be lying concealed in the cover near the crest. The beam swung back and forth, then stopped. I was using the rifle scope as a monocular and the weight of the rifle finally made my arms tremble. I thought I saw the panther behind a bush, but Granville put a hand on my shoulder to stop my shot and quietly told me to wait.

Suddenly the panther sprang right into the center of the beam, turned toward us, and sat down, staring into the light.

"Carefully, carefully," cautioned Granville.

I raised the rifle to my shoulder, noticing a slight tremor in my left arm. The panther looked a mile away in the artificial light. I held steady, but too long, too long! I pulled instead of squeezed the trigger. The panther ran over the hill, untouched.

Granville shook his head sadly. Ada murmured small sounds of condolence. I felt like a fool. I'd have felt like a bigger fool if I'd known, as I discovered the next day, that the shot was fired at no more than 70 yards.

We went back to the hut we'd just passed and woke up the occupants—a poorer-than-average Indian farmer, his wife, and goose-pimpled brood. They knew the panther well. "Double tendwa," said the farmer, actually using the English word double. He also called him, so Granville translated to me later, a "round tiger" because of his size. This panther often visited the hut, snarling at the family through the rickety rattan and generally frightening the wife and kids into hysterics. Sometimes he would scratch at the sides of the hut and then even the stalwart head of the family said a quick prayer.

The farmer used to keep a dog to warn him of the panther, but the panther promptly ate it—and its numerous successors. In fact, the dog population of the entire area had been decimated by this spotted cat.

We sent back to camp for a couple of goats. One we tied to a log near the hut. The other we tethered some distance away so that they would call to each other and possibly attract the panther. I crouched inside the doorway of the ill-smelling hut and waited.

The goats blatted until they grew hoarse. I waited for several hours. The jeep, this time driven by Granville, returned long before the panther. We loaded our goats into the jeep and went back to camp.

Several days later, when I had stopped kicking myself around the Indian countryside, we discovered the pug marks of an exceptionally large panther around one of our tiger baits, which was a small, rather pathetic buffalo calf. Why the panther hadn't killed the calf I couldn't imagine. He was certainly big enough to do so. Instead, he'd merely walked around it, sat in front of it, and then left it alone. The buffalo calf seemed only slightly upset when we went to fetch him in the morning. It's hard to tell with a buffalo, but it seemed this calf was either inured to large panthers or was a staunch fatalist.

"Must have been the same panther," said Granville to me. "Couldn't be two that large in so small an area. We'll get him for sure. I've an idea."

The idea was the construction of a munda or bait-holding platform which would stand about five feet off the ground—too high for the numerous hyenas in the area, but only a moderate leap for a panther. We cut bamboo for the floor of the munda, the Gond natives taking but three whacks with their small axes to sever a bamboo pole as thick as your arm. We cut small trees for the supports. One of the trees we cut had thick red sap which flowed like blood down the trunk. We lashed the poles tight with strips peeled from the bamboo and tied a goat to the sturdiest crosspiece in the middle of the platform. We then built a machan nearby in a towering fig tree, untied our patient buffalo calf from his stump and sent him back to the bungalow for a rest.

"No need to sit up all night," commented Granville. "If the panther kills the goat he'll leave the uneaten portion on the munda and we'll get him next evening."

Sure enough, the morning light of the following day showed a platform devoid of live goat. We approached the munda congratulating ourselves on our cunning, but suddenly stopped in horror. There was no goat or any part thereof on the platform. In some unaccountable manner that panther had slipped the bamboo crosspole from its lashing and dragged it and the goat away.

Actually, he hadn't been able to drag the goat too far, because the pole had wedged between two trees. There the panther had broken his fast. Unfortunately, the goat remains were nowhere near a suitable tree for the placing of a machan, so we had to move the carcass to a more favorable spot and build a new machan. It took most of the day to accomplish this, but at last we finished and Colonel Granville and I climbed onto the machan about four in the afternoon. He had his big lamp. I had my rifle.

Then I did something I've never done

before or since. I gave Granville my rifle to lean against the trunk of the tree just out of my reach. It seemed more comfortable that way.

This rifle, by the way, was a prized possession. It had been custom-made for me by A. Francotte of Liège, Belgium. It was beautifully crafted, with automatic ejectors for the belted rimless .375 case. It was exceptionally accurate for a double. It fired six shots (three from each barrel) into a 2½-inch group at 100 yards. It was equipped with a 2½X Hensoldt scope.

Two hours passed. Then Granville grabbed my arm and motioned me to be extra quiet. He'd seen the panther. A large bush partly blocked my view, but Granville, sitting to my right and slightly behind me, saw the panther clearly. It was walking unconcernedly along a dusty jungle path.

All at once the cat spotted his displaced goat and instantly crouched flat. That way he remained for several minutes. Then he rose and began to move cautiously toward the goat carcass. He now passed from Granville's view and came directly into mine.

When the panther was right in front of me he sat down in the dust and began licking his chest and paws and washing his face. I reached for my rifle across Granville's chest. He restrained me. I didn't dare move unnecessarily or make a sound. There was the double panther not 20 yards away. I almost screamed. Again I tried to reach for the rifle (which should have been across my knees, anyway) and again Granville held back my arm. He'd lost sight of the panther when it crouched and assumed it was still suspicious. He wanted no unnecessary movements which might further alarm the big cat. He had no way of knowing that the panther was sitting—just sitting—in the open right in front of me.

The panther finished his toilet, strolled a few yards in the direction of the goat, then lay down with a magnificent yawn. I was near to fainting. Again I reached for the rifle, and once again (I knew he would) Granville pulled gently on my sleeve.

The sun was setting rapidly and the form of the panther turned from yellow to gray in the fading light. I could barely see his outline as he walked slowly to his picnic supper and commenced feeding noisily.

Granville handed me my rifle. I hadn't seen it for so long. I almost kissed my twin-barreled friend.

Granville whispered in my ear, "Can you see to shoot without the light?"

The moon wasn't high yet and I could only get a vague idea of the spotted cat against the black background of jungle. I shook my head. I'd need the light.

"When you're ready," whispered Granville, standing up and aiming the lamp toward the panther.

I waited until the panther was broadside, then turned and tapped Granville on the leg. He snapped the light on and the panther stood illumi-

nated in the blinding beam. He wasn't standing broadside now. His back was toward me. I lost a second in choosing a new aiming point.

The panther looked over his shoulder, snarled, and bounded into the trees with an Olympic-caliber leap. My shot puffed dust just in front of the deceased goat—the exact spot where the panther had been standing a second before.

We waited for two more hours, but the panther didn't reappear. I never saw him again.

To make matters worse (admittedly hard to do), as we went back to the jeep we noticed the absolutely fresh pug marks of a large tiger that had come down the path where every evening except this one we'd tied our buffalo calf. Ten nights in a row that calf had been there. The tiger came the eleventh, when our bait calf was in camp.

On occasion since then I've waked up to find my pillow soaking wet. Oh, I know, the weather's been hot and humid, but I swear it's wet from tears. I've been dreaming about that panther again.

THE END