I Fell for a Leopard

by TED SHATTO

I had promised Dr. Jean Reynaud of the French School of Medicine at Kabul, Afghanistan, some real hunting in India. In view of previous entanglements with customs red tape we'd left our Winchesters at home along with our wives and families. I was enjoying a long winter vacation from my work at the American-staffed Habibia College, and Reynaud had conjured up a leave of absence for the first half of January.

We were rolling along the Grand Trunk highway east from New Delhi in a badly overcrowded motor bus. Our conversation was carried on alternately in English, French, and Persian, but only in the latter tongue did we have much of a common language background.

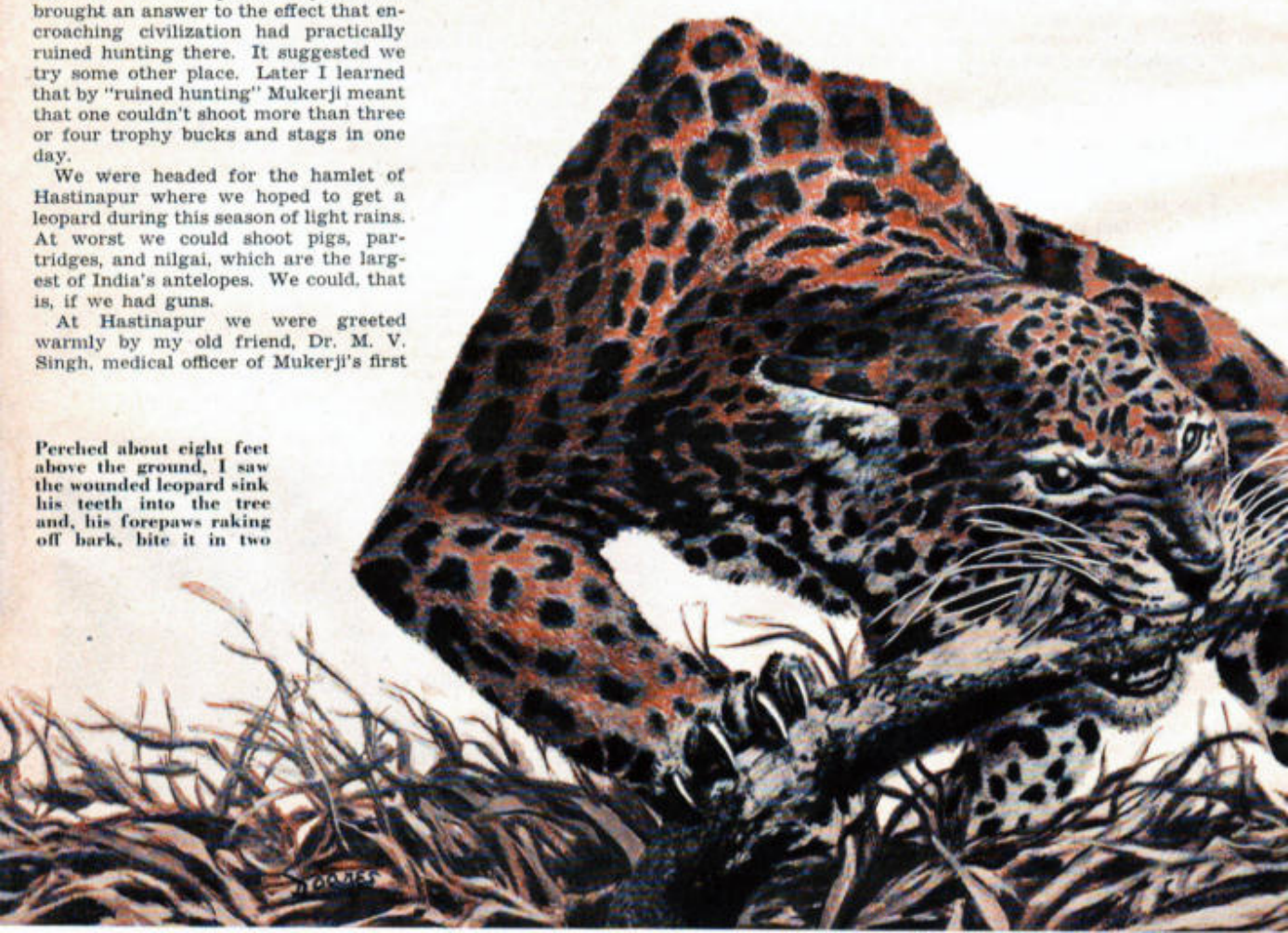
Somehow our plans had gone awry. A telegram to A. D. Mukerji, my friend in Kashipur who had arranged a tiger hunt for me the previous year, had brought an answer to the effect that encroaching civilization had practically ruined hunting there. It suggested we try some other place. Later I learned that by "ruined hunting" Mukerji meant that one couldn't shoot more than three or four trophy bucks and stags in one day.

We were headed for the hamlet of Hastinapur where we hoped to get a leopard during this season of light rains. At worst we could shoot pigs, partridges, and nilgai, which are the largest of India's antelopes. We could, that is, if we had guns.

At Hastinapur we were greeted warmly by my old friend, Dr. M. V. Singh, medical officer of Mukerji's first colonization project. Like most devout Hindus, Singh has never been trained to shoot. But long association with the ever-hunting Mukerji had aroused his interest, and he had learned to blast down such animals as were driven to him. Partridges were another matter, though. Somehow Doc never got the hang of swinging and leading, and he collected his birds—amid much sarcastic humor—while they sat on the ground.

Singh installed us in a guest house and loaned us his own shotgun for the afternoon. Jean and I were eager and couldn't wait to get going. We walked about four miles, missed four partridges, crippled a fifth, and lost it. We found a nilgai family led by a monstrous blue bull. We stalked the group for a while but never got within shooting range. Then we were joined by four native boys who said they'd beat for us in exchange for shares in the kill.

Right away we got several partridges. We located a sounder of pigs in some heavy cane grass bordering a small watercourse, and then the fun began. For an hour our boys, driven no doubt by an imaginary odor of pork chops, beat the pigs back and forth for about a mile. But the porkers steadfastly refused to come out and be shot. Finally they broke over the bank and headed for Jean who, fortunately, was holding the gun. He fired both right and left barrels, and then there was a squealing such as I'd never heard.



Perched about eight feet above the ground, I saw the wounded leopard sink his teeth into the tree and, his forepaws raking off bark, bite it in two

ILLUSTRATED BY ROBERT DOARES

From my position across the creek, I could see Jean and the boys only from the waist up and had to fill in the rest with my imagination. Reynaud was bent over the gun, fumbling with shells, while two boys surrounded the squealing pig. As they stood, staffs held high, the pig charged. Then as the pig turned to flee, the other boys beat it as it ran. The pig turned on its new tormentors and charged, whereupon the boys changed roles and the other two beat the pig to divert its attention.

Though I was afraid one of our friends might get slashed by the pig's tusks, I laughed heartily and was a bit sorry when Jean finally reloaded the shotgun and ended the show. He'd taken a sow and a small boar. Slim pickings, perhaps, but the results of the day's hunt lifted our spirits immeasurably.

That night Dr. Singh joined us at dinner. Though he could take food with us, our presence at his table would have meant defilement in terms of orthodox Hinduism. He brought with him an older fellow who was dressed in a thin muslin dhoti and had a homespun blanket wrapped around his slender frame. He obviously was a man of the poorer classes, but he carried his head proudly and his eyes flashed in the lamplight.

This man was Ho Ram, Mukerji's chief hunter and tracker at Hastinapur. We'd hunted together the year before, and I had a lot of respect for his ability. But I knew the feeling wasn't mutual. All of the good shooting I'd done with my .270 rifle took place at Kashipur. When I'd hunted this area with Ho Ram I'd bungled stalks and missed shots. In his eyes I was a rank novice. This impassive little brown man, whose wordly possessions I could have bought for $1, looked down on me, and he knew that I knew it.

"It will almost certainly rain tonight," said Dr. Singh. "The soil here is sandy and the rain will wash out old sign. If a panther is in the area he will be easy to trail." Like all who live in India, Singh referred to the great golden, spotted cat we call a leopard as a panther. "Ho Ram and his men will be out at dawn to look for tracks. If they find any, they will follow the panther to his lying-up place and surround him. A runner will come for us and we shall go out. They will beat the panther to us and you shall have your shoot. I have sent men to procure guns for you, and

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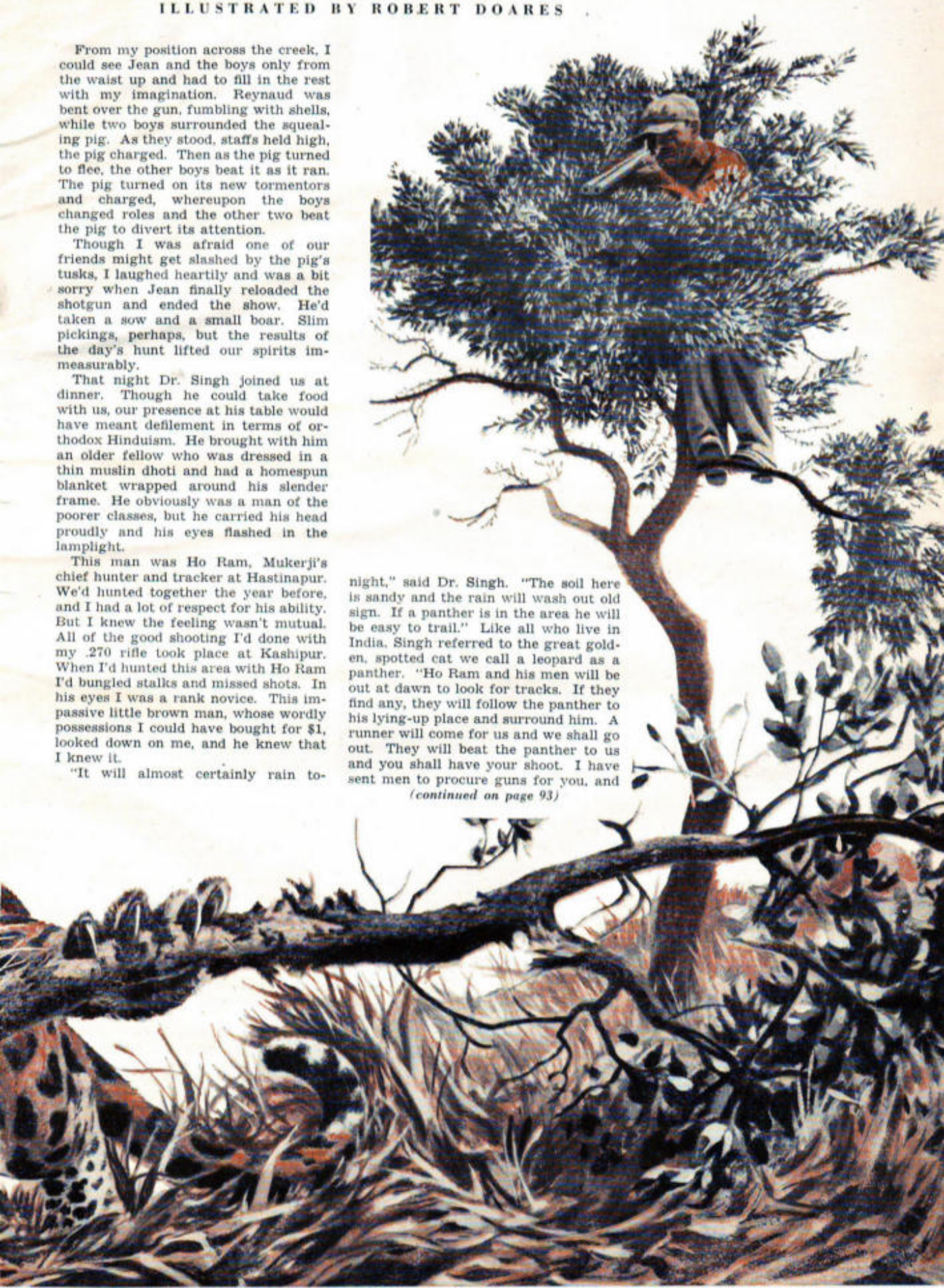

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I think that we shall get a panther tomorrow—if it rains."

Jean and I fell asleep that night thrilling to the roar of a heavy downpour on our roof. In India's lowlands there's no such thing as a light rain.

The early sun irradiated a million prisms of droplets on the fields of sugar cane that stretched as far as the eye could see. Reynaud and I, shivering at our first touch of morning air, moved into the warming sunshine that flooded our veranda. We lighted our after-breakfast smokes and looked around. Just to the east the fields of sugar cane ended abruptly and a little, dry tropical forest began. It extended for perhaps a mile, then petered out as the ravines of the brakes gave out on a flat, swampy, grassland — the ancient bed of the Ganges River.

After a while Jean and I wandered idly across the road to Dr. Singh's home and to his dispensary where we found him preparing inoculation shots. His smile was as warming as the sun,

The trophy, propped up by the beaters, seems to be guest of honor as Dr. Singh, left, and Dr. Reynaud enjoy their lunch

but he was preoccupied with his work and we could tell that we'd barged in on him.

"Good morning," he greeted us. "It is too early to hear from Ho Ram, but I think you're in luck. Nine times out of 10 we find a panther after a rain like this. I will be finished in about an hour and by then we shall know." He stabbed his hypodermic needle into a quivering unfortunate, then went on. "Even if we don't find a panther, I can promise you pigs and partridges. See you later."

We left him and wandered aimlessly about the village, stopping at the little bazaar where I bought a rupee's worth of cashew nuts. Then we hiked half a mile to a little Jain temple at the edge of a dozen acres of sacred forest. We gazed at this holy place for some time and tried to interpret its carvings.

A sambur stag sounded his call from the near-by forest. What would alarm him in these protected woods and in daylight? It was maddening to know that there was a fine animal, the size of a small bull elk, within 100 yards of us and we couldn't do anything about it. We had no firearms. We'd be lucky to get anything better than muzzle-loaders for the coming leopard hunt—if the men found a leopard.

Thoughts of the leopard quickened our steps back to Dr. Singh's dispensary. We found he'd finished his business and was giving orders to six or eight subordinates in machine-gun Hindustani. Ending, he turned to us with the broadest of smiles.

"Gentlemen, you are indeed lucky. Ho Ram has located not one but two panthers."

My heart gave a sudden jump. This was more like it. But what were we going to shoot the leopards with? Singh must have read my mind or, more likely, the look on my face. "I have located guns for you. Nothing like your fancy rifle with the telescope sight, but good enough to kill a panther."

Since Jean and I had no preparations to make for the hunt, we just got in the waiting jeep. Singh climbed into the driver's seat, and we were joined by his servant who carried two old hammer double-barrelled shotguns that must have been among the first breechloaders ever manufactured. He clutched the relics tightly as the jeep lurched off, bound for some distant rendezvous with Ho Ram.

So far as I was concerned, I felt that the servant could keep his old shotguns. I'd prefer getting a leopard with bare hands to shooting one of those antiques. Reynaud said nothing, but I could hear him muttering French words I couldn't understand. I never learned to swear in the language.

We found our hunting party clustered several miles away at the foot of the brakes. After we disembarked, the servant reluctantly handed us his precious guns and then drove off. "He will bring lunch," explained Singh. "Now we will rest here and wait for Ho Ram."

We rested an hour, which was plenty for me. Then a runner arrived and we all set off for a place where the leopard was supposed to be waiting to be shot. My two doctor friends walked together and talked shop. They'd figured some route around the language barrier and were rolling pills and making incisions at a great rate.

I lagged some distance behind to take a picture. Something must have happened to my camera to make it smaller, because I had a great deal of trouble pulling out the lens, focusing, and snapping the shutter. Far be it from me to be nervous over a couple of leopards.

We walked a mile or so, waded through sloughs, circled the brakes, and then came to an abrupt halt. "Here," I thought, "is where Shatto shoots a leopard."

Singh turned to me with an apologetic smile. "A runner has come from Ho Ram," he said. "He says that the male panther is getting restless and that we'd better let the female alone until after we shoot the male."

So we retraced our steps and finally arrived at the cart road along the foot of the brakes. After a short walk, two miles or so, along this road we came upon Ho Ram. The skinny old hunter was squatted along the edge of the road puffing a brown cheroot. After a polite "Nemesta, sahib" to me, he talked at length to Singh. His attitude towards me was aloof, to say the least,

and I knew that the only thing that would change it would be performance. I silently vowed he'd see performance today such as he'd never seen before.

Singh handed Jean and me each half a dozen shells. "Use the large grape first and then the small grape if you need more," he said. Large grape, I was told, is the British designation of buckshot with five pellets to the case while small grape defines a case containing nine pellets. "We are near the panther now and must be very quiet. After we reach our stands they will put us in trees and then the panther will come out. Whoever sees him first shoots." He smiled his easy smile. "It will all be very simple."

We padded softly in single file behind the flitting shadow of Ho Ram, and stopped at the crest of a little ridge between two gulleys like ravines. Two men helped Reynaud into a tree. What constitutes a tree in these parts is largely a matter of definition since none of the foliage is higher than 15 feet. Singh was boosted up next, and I was assigned to the right of the three positions.

My tree was a 12-foot thorn of some kind, and for the life of me I couldn't see any way of getting my bulk up it. While I stood arguing, a nearly naked hunter squirreled up into the tree and two others attacked me from the rear and pushed me up into his waiting hands. Somehow I found myself standing on a swaying limb about eight feet above ground. My feet were too close together for any sort of balance, but enough thorns stuck into me and my clothes to help me maintain my position, though quite shakily.

With unsteady fingers I slipped two large grape into my ancient blunderbuss, cocked the large, ornate hammers, and tried to relax and survey the situation. Ho Ram and his men had disappeared, and I couldn't see either of my friends in the other trees. They couldn't see me, either, which was fortunate. I was alone and waiting for the leopard.

The drive started at a shouted signal from across the ravine. My pulses leaped as 30 men's voices raised a series of "ho's" and "ha's" that marked a crescent line moving towards me. The leopard was somewhere in between. I wondered where I would aim if the beast ran under my tree, and how I would shoot at all if it came out to the right of me for I wasn't free to twist far enough in that direction to fire a shot.

The leopard appeared out of the shadows. He didn't leap, run, or move. He just materialized from the dark shade of the ravine. He was a magnificent animal. He radiated the color of burnished gold, and the fiery sheen of his background hues outshone the brilliance of his black rosettes and the shimmering white of his underparts.

Now I wished I were holding my beloved .270 rifle instead of this monstrous old shotgun. But I raised the clumsy thing and pointed it at the leopard's chest. His alert eye caught the movement instantly, and I knew I must fire quickly. Praying that the gun would operate, I pulled the right trigger. The recoil of the piece sent me back somewhat and my right foot slipped, but the thorns in my back and shoulders kept me upright on my perch.

The leopard dropped with the shot but recovered as quickly as a ping-pong ball. With a blood-curdling snarl he jumped high in the air once, twice, and then, roaring in rage, he attacked a bush and tore it to shreds. Without even a glance he leaped 20 feet backward and tackled a young sapling. He was almost under my tree and I watched, awestruck, while his great teeth crunched through the young tree and, as his flailing forepaws raked off great splotches of bark, actually bit it in two. And I was less than eight feet above him!

Now he struck blindly at everything under my tree, and his blood began to appear. Round and round he went in a crazy wild dance, and everything he touched was destroyed. I tried to follow him with my gun but didn't get very far. Finally he stopped nearly under me, sprawled out on his belly, bit into a stick, clawed up great gobs of turf, and raged a horrible roaring protest. I pointed my gun at his shoulder and pulled the left trigger. Nothing happened. I pulled harder. Still that big hammer stayed cocked as if to mock me. In desperation I yanked on it savagely. The gun still refused to fire, but my right foot slipped, went clear off the branch and dangled tantalizingly in the air. The leopard looked up just as some part of my clothing started to rip. I felt myself beginning to fall. Thorns slapped me in the face, and somehow the ground and the leopard seemed to lift up.

Lying half on my chest and face and half on my knees, I stared into the leopard's face from a distance of about four feet. My hands clutched the shotgun which had fallen crosswise under my belly. I couldn't pull it out from under and I couldn't lift myself up. With my chin buried in dirt and my posterior sticking up I hardly presented a dignified appearance. Though the leopard still held the piece of wood in his jaws, his terrible countenance staring into mine bore a look of surprise.

His gathering muscles warned me of an impending spring, but I couldn't do anything except tug futilely at the gun. There was death in his eyes as he started to leap, and I managed a desperate yell.

I don't know whether the shout disconcerted him or whether he just missed his leap. Anyway he cleared me completely and bounded off through the trees that held my companions. A volley of shots greeted him, and by the time I managed to disentangle myself and get up, his dying growls were just ending.

"He may not be dead yet, Ted," Singh called out. "Don't come down from your tree until I tell you to." Ah, so they thought I was still up in the tree!

I couldn't think of a good answer, so waited until Ho Ram and the beaters came up before approaching the kill. What had they seen? After we'd admired the leopard, taken pictures, and

the two doctors had argued over who had inflicted which of the many wounds that had killed the poor beast, Singh turned to me.

"You only fired once, Ted. What happened?"

"This gun," I growled. "The left barrel won't fire."

He looked at my fowling piece, its left hammer still back in full cock. "You must have pulled the right trigger again. It's easy to do when you're excited. Remember, you're not used to a double gun."

"Me pull the right trigger twice?" I just about exploded. "What kind of hunter do you think I am?"

Ho Ram came up and engaged Dr. Singh with a brief dialogue, looking at me with what I swear was pity in his eyes.

"Why don't you point your gun in the air and pull the left trigger now?" Singh asked.

"Nothing will happen," I said with some heat. "It will misfire—just as it did when the leopard was under my tree." I raised the gun and pulled the left trigger. BOOM! Will I never learn to keep my big mouth shut? THE END