When you face up to a gaur, it's one or the other—you kill him or he kills you. The one I was after was no exception

By HERB KLEIN

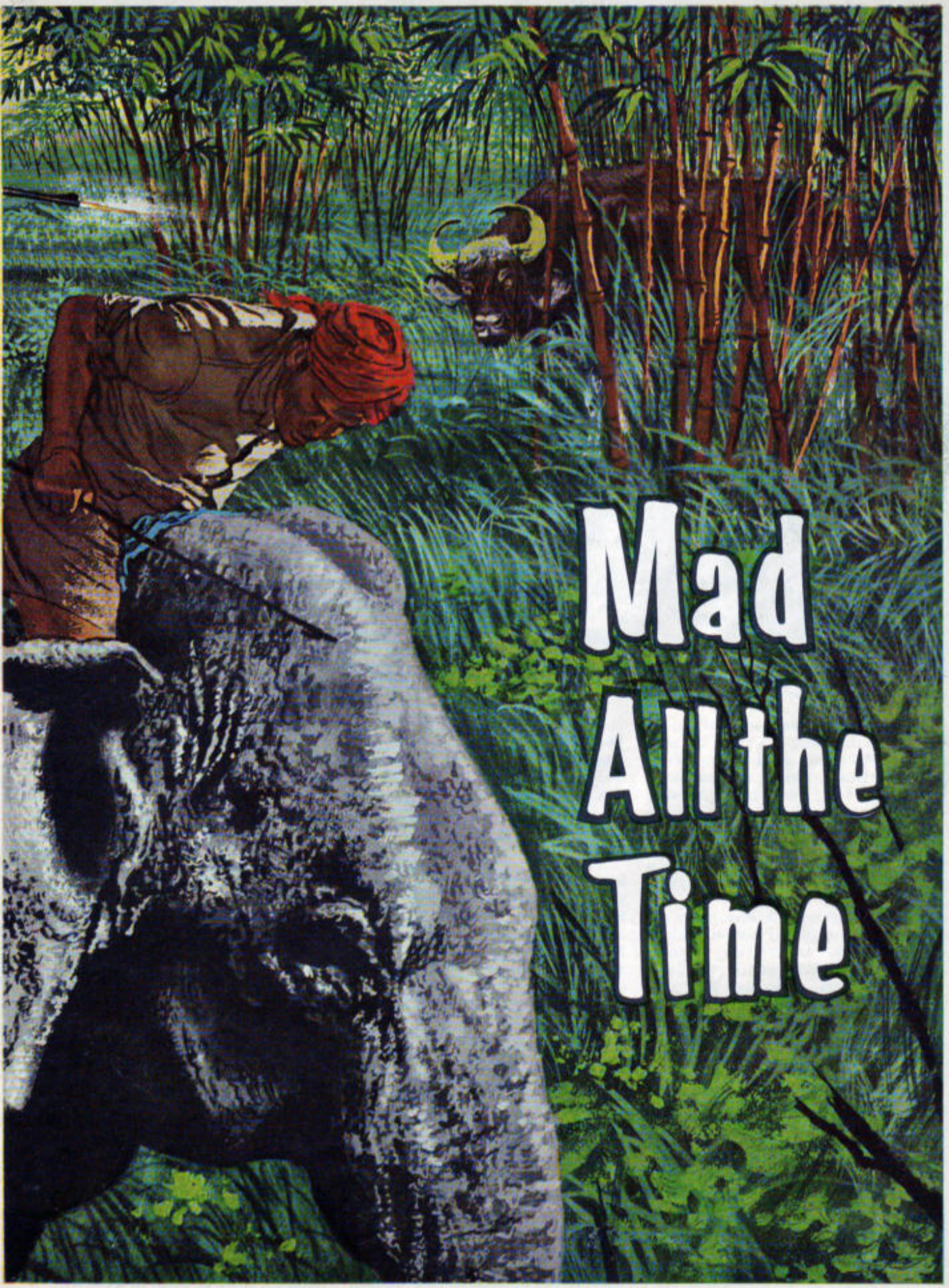
"BETTER watch it," he said. "These old gaur bulls soon get tired of being chased, and this time he might just charge us—elephant or no elephant." It was Bill Hagstrom, my local shikari, who was giving me the warning and advice. We were on elephant back, tracking down an old rogue gaur in the wilds of northern Assam, the state in the extreme northeast of India.

When I'd returned from my previous trip there in early April, 1954, I promised myself I'd never go back to India. Although my hunting luck had been good, and I'd collected many new trophies, a month there had been more than enough. Other than my outfitter, my guide, and our willing but inept crew, no one—least of all the customs officials—had given a darn about making the trip a little more pleasant.

But as the months went by, I must have mellowed. I was told that things were much different in India—that customs and police were more understanding, that the outfitters had better personnel and better equipment, and that game was still plentiful. So when Hemshanker Joshi, a young Indian of the Brahman caste who runs Hunters and Hunters, outfitters from Bombay, wrote me that he had a permit for two gaur and two buffaloes in Assam, as well as permission to hunt in the high Himalayas in the Kashmir, I couldn't get there fast enough.

I had shot a gaur in the central-Indian state of Madhya Pradesh in 1954, but quite a small one. I badly wanted a big, bad gaur bull. Also I hoped to get one of those large, wild Indian buffalo bulls, and a promise of another look for ibex, serow, blue sheep, goral—and perhaps a Himalayan black bear in the high Kashmir mountains—convinced

ILLUSTRATED BY JOHN McDERMOTT



Mad All the Time

Head down, he was ready to charge. I had little time to aim, and no choice but a high shoulder shot

I pose with my scar-faced gaur and .378 Weatherby that stopped him. His widest spread: 32½ inches; horns are 28½ and 28

me completely. I was soon ready to go.

From my home in Dallas, Texas, I traveled by way of Honolulu, Wake Island, Guam, Manila, and Bangkok, and arrived in Calcutta the evening of May 4. My first brush with the Indian customs officials was almost pleasant. This, of course, covered only my traveling clothes and the two 35 mm. cameras I was carrying.

Next morning, however, when we went to get my air-cargo shipment—rifles, ammunition, binoculars, flashlights, hunting knives, movie camera, unexposed film, and so on—things were slightly different.

I guess we were lucky to clear my shipment in five days—all of it, that is, except my .22 Winchester Model 52 sporter. It took three weeks to clear that, and all because someone down the line had copied the serial number as 585618 instead of 58561B.

So we left the .22 in bond with the customs officials and took off for Assam, the land of many tribes and many languages. About 120 languages and dialects are spoken in this state. The language situation became quite a problem, especially when the boys got a little excited.

The plane ride northeast from Calcutta to Lilabari by way of Gauhati, Tezpur, and Jorhat, wasn't exactly plush. It was about 105° in the shade, and as humid as Houston, Texas. Our plane was an old DC-3 cargo ship with a wooden bench along each side. Front and rear were piled high with cargo.

At Lilabari we were met by our local shikari, and he was a pleasant surprise. Imagine having a big Swede walk up to you in the middle of Assam and say, "Hello, Herb. I'm Bill Hagstrom, your guide." And what a guide and grand companion he turned out to be.

Bill came from Minneapolis originally, but he and Mrs. Hagstrom have been in Assam about 10 years. He and his friend, Dana Larson, also from Minneapolis and of Swedish descent, are both Baptist missionaries at North Lakhimpur.

Bill turned out to be a real gun nut who knows his ballistics as well as he does his Bible. Whenever the pulpit and the mission compound can spare him, he grabs his .375 and heads for the jungle.

Many times Bill has been called upon to do away with rogue elephants, rogue buffaloes, and gaur that have threatened his people. Consequently, Bill knows the country as well as the wildest of the tribesmen he's trying to convert.

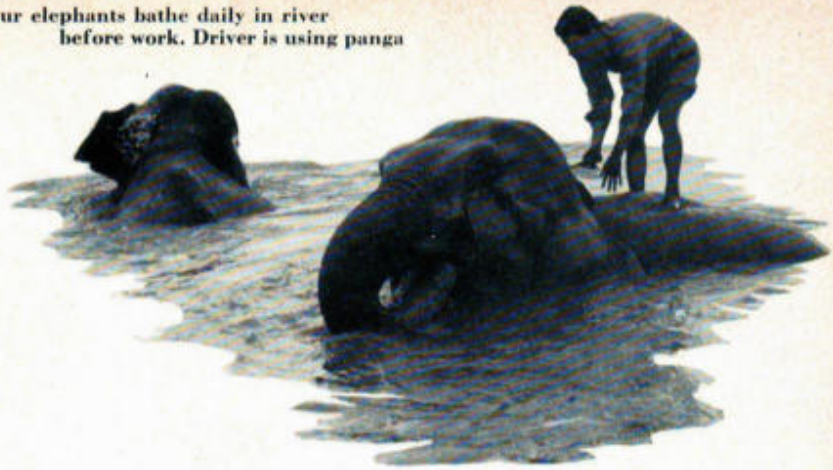
The Hagstroms are raising their four children in this jungle country. But in spite of this wild environment, I have never seen such smart and beautifully behaved youngsters.

After tea with Bill and his family at the mission, we immediately took off in his jeep station wagon to a tea garden on the bank of the Subansiri River at the end of the road. Waiting there for us were boats that would take our gear to camp. I got my first look at one of our elephants, Ratnomala, and met Rudra, our elephant driver or "mahout."

Our gear was loaded into two long, slender boats hewed out of logs, wnich are handled faultlessly by men of the Miri tribe. These Miris are also great fishermen with spear, net, or crude hooks and lines. For the next week they kept us in fresh fish, sometimes bringing us the great mahseer, the fighting fish of India, sometimes trout from the smaller streams, and sometimes a tasty fish similar to our channel cat.

Hem Joshi, our outfitter from Bombay, went to camp by boat with

Our elephants bathe daily in river before work. Driver is using panga



the Miris and the gear. Bill and I climbed aboard our elephant, Ratnomala, which we rode spraddle-legged as we would a horse, the better to be ready to shoot to either right or left, I was told. And when I say spraddle-legged, I mean exactly that. I used to gripe if an outfitter in Wyoming or the Canadian Rockies stuck me on a horse that was too well fed, but after riding that elephant for two weeks, I felt qualified to do the split in a ballet dance.

I had often seen pictures of queens and kings riding elephants sidesaddle on a plush-cushioned howdah with fringe on the top, and that's more or less what I had expected. Instead, we had a canvas pad, long enough for two men to sit on, and tied to the elephant's back with a rope. It struck me that this wasn't too comfortable or too safe an arrangement for staying with a swaying elephant. There wasn't any leather to pull in case we had to get out of there fast.

The mahout sits astraddle the elephant's neck and guides the beast with his feet. Should the elephant misbehave, he jabs it in the back of the head with a gadget that looks like an ice pick, or clobbers it with the back of his panga, an Assamese version of the machete.

As we started down the narrow trail through the heavy jungle, Bill said, "Better slip one into the barrel of that Weatherby .378. There's an old rogue elephant that's been molesting some of the natives along this path. If he gives us or our lady elephant any trouble, we'll just bust him."

My blood pressure went up 20 points as he talked, and immediately I forgot all about the hard pad I was sitting on and the possibility of getting seasick.

We passed two herds of wild elephants taking the forest apart, but saw no sign of the old rogue. To tell the truth, I was mighty glad. I didn't care about trying to shoot one moving elephant from the back of another moving elephant. An elephant's brain (the only sure spot to stop him) weighs only about 10 pounds, and that's a mighty small target in all that bulk.

After loping through about two miles of dense forest, our path opened into the most beautiful valley I have ever seen—the valley of the Dulung River. This depression, as well as the low foothills of the Himalayas along the opposite bank, was entirely denuded during the terrific earthquakes and the ensuing floods in 1950. No one will ever know how many thousands of natives were drowned or otherwise killed during this terrific disaster, and those who lived through it moved away for fear their gods might put on an encore. This entire valley, about 45 or 50 miles long, and up to five miles wide, hardly had a tree left in it. The floods after the earthquakes washed out everything. But now we found the valley lush with new elephant grass and young bamboo—a perfect set-up for gaur, elephants, boars, deer of several species, tigers, and panthers.

We turned our elephant and followed the river to our camp at Dulung Mulch, the mouth of the Dulung River, where the Dulung flows into the Subansiri.

Dana Larson, the other missionary, had put up our tents and arranged for food, boats, and riding elephants several days beforehand. The mahouts camped with our elephants about half a mile back upriver where there was plenty of young bamboo, the favorite food of elephants.

Dana had also done a little scouting, and reported seeing a herd of nine gaur close to camp. The herd bull, he said, *(continued on page 129)*

Camp is at the mouth of the Dulung River. Rain falls three or four times a day, and—like these natives—we finally ignore it

(continued from page 63)

was a beauty—very big in body and with a set of beautiful, long horns. That sounded like what I was looking for.

We'd been rained on riding to camp, but that, I learned, was a daily affair in Assam in May. The annual rainfall at Lakhimpur averages 422 inches per year, and it doesn't rain during December, January, and February.

For the first three or four days, I tried to stay dry by wearing my rain suit and rain hat. But in this hot, humid climate it's almost as bad inside a plastic rain suit as it is just getting rained on. So after about the third day, you decide to get wet, just as the natives do. About that time you start smelling like your elephant and your mahout anyway, so you're just one happy family and rain three or four times a day is a real fresher-upper.

There isn't much chance to dry out your clothes, so you sleep wet, eat wet, hunt wet, and pretty much live wet. Most of the natives slosh around barefooted, and for their size they have tremendous feet. I didn't examine any of them closely, but it wouldn't surprise me if some of them were becoming webfooted.

By the time we'd had a typical Indian dinner that first evening—everything saturated with red peppers, chili, and curry—it was time to go to bed because 4:30 a.m. was getting-up time for gaur hunting.

In parts of India he is known as the bison, in northern India as the gaur, in Burma as a siang, in Thailand and the Malay Peninsula as a seladang, but in Assam he is the mithan. The big mature gaur bull is almost black, except

for his white feet and white socks which reach up to his knees and hocks, and his creamy-gray forehead. He stands about six feet at the shoulder, where he has a definite hump that tapers off sharply about the middle of his back, and his semicircular horns are greenish yellow with olive-green tips.

The gaur, or whatever you prefer to call him, is considered by many hunters as one of the meanest and most dangerous of all big-game animals. He just doesn't have as good a press agent as some of the other large uglies of his family. When wounded, and sometimes without provocation, he will often waylay a too-anxious follower, and gore and stomp him until only a red spot remains, or he will die with another bullet in him. With a gaur it's always one or the other. He has a very even disposition—mad all the time.

For an animal weighing a ton or more, he has rather small deerlike feet, and is very agile. He acts more like a deer in the rough foothill country than one of the ox family. And the gaur loves that foothill country, probably because the food suits him and because he can appear and disappear like magic. He is quite a shy guy, feeding only late in the evening, at night during moonlight, or very early in the morning. During the day he retreats to the heaviest bamboo thickets, away from the hot sun, the flies, gnats, and mosquitoes, and it's impossible to approach him there. His hearing and sense of smell are probably as well developed as those in our American moose, which, I believe, is about tops on our continent, at least as far as hearing is concerned. Only the wolf and perhaps the polar bear have a better sense of smell.

During the hot summer months, the gaur usually comes to water twice a day, morning and evening, but during the cooler months, once a day seems to be enough. As with elephants and buffaloes, the old rogues are the real meanies. During their prime years, these old gaurs probably led the herd. But sooner or later a younger and more vigorous bull comes along, beats them up, kicks them out, and takes over. After that old rogues lead lonesome and solitary lives and turn meaner and surlier. Those are the fellows you have to look out for.

At daybreak the next morning, things started to happen fast. Rudra, our mahout, came at a gallop to tell us that a large guna (bull) gaur had been grazing with our two elephants all night. He'd been afraid to come sooner for fear that the bull might take after him, so he'd sat by his fire waiting for dawn. Just before sunup the bull crossed the river and disappeared into the heavier bamboo thickets on the other side.

We gulped our tea and were up on our elephants faster than I can write this. The trail was easy to follow, and from the tracks in the mud along the river, it looked as if he might be a good one.

Once in the heavy stuff on the other side, our elephants really went to work. Good hunting elephants are trained to trail animals just as a hound trails a

rabbit. Our Ratnomala was doing a wonderful job. The bull gaur clearly had been browsing leisurely on the young, tender bamboo shoots. After an hour of trailing, we came to an extra-thick growth of 25-foot-high bamboo. Here, apparently, he'd decided to spend the day.

We looked until our eyes popped, but couldn't spot him in that heavy stuff. We finally decided to circle for a better view. This maneuver, of course, gave the old bull our wind, and he tore out of there. I saw him for a split second before he disappeared into heavy stuff, and I could have taken a snap shot. But I held my fire because I didn't want a wounded gaur on our hands if I could help it.

Our elephant took right after him, and in another 15 minutes we heard him flush again. This time, however, we didn't see him.

It was then that Bill warned me that this time he might just charge us, elephant or no elephant. It wasn't another minute until Ratnomala stopped dead still.

Rudra, our mahout, saw him first. Then I could make out the yellowish forehead, the green-tipped horns and about a foot of his big, tall shoulders behind a bamboo clump. The gaur stood head down and ready. He was fed up with being followed, and was ready to charge, even though it was an elephant that was following him. I couldn't take much time to aim, and had no choice but a high shoulder shot. But one 300-grain full-patch from that .378 floored him.

In this case, as on several other occasions when the target has been that close, I just sighted over the scope, about the way you'd shoot a shotgun. With a little practice, you can do pretty well at short range. It's rather like shooting a pistol from the hip, I suppose.

That bullet went through both shoulder blades, and possibly knocked down a few Chinese Reds on its way across the border. The distance? Seven yards. A man on foot wouldn't have had a chance in that heavy growth.

He wasn't the biggest gaur in the world, but he was a battle-scarred old-timer. His horns were well-corrugated and worn quite thin; they made almost a complete loop. Although he had a spread of only 32½ inches at the widest point, his horns measured a respectable 28½ and 28 inches. He wore battle slits in his ears, and his face had a three-inch gash that was still bleeding.

But Bill Hagstrom wasn't satisfied. "Now," he said, "let's find Larson's herd and look over the herd bull. We have a permit for two, you know."

"O.K.," I told him. "If we find a better one than this one, I'll shoot him. If not, this one will do me fine."

"That's a deal," Bill said. So after taking some pictures and instructing the boys about taking the meat to the mission by boat, we returned to camp. We ate a leisurely breakfast, then took off again aboard our elephant in search of more gaur.

But during the next week we found only two young stray bulls, both with

horns only half developed. It seemed that the herd we were looking for was always showing up where we'd been the day before. We hadn't even gotten a glimpse of a cow or a calf, much less the big herd bull.

Nevertheless, our stay at the mouth of the Dulung was most enjoyable. We took a few pictures and helped the Miris catch fish, but mostly we kept our eyes peeled for gaur. At night, and during the hottest part of the day, Bill and I swapped tall tales. I had to tell him all about North American hunting because of his upcoming trip back here on which he hoped to get a little moose and sheep hunting.

But mostly I let Bill do the talking about his years in Assam. He spoke of the natives, some of whom were pretty tough until just a few years ago, and about the various rogue elephants he's had to go after because he had the only gun in that part of Assam that would kill an elephant. Bill, and Dana Larson, have also had many experiences with tiger, panther, buffalo, and wild boar that became obnoxious.

But of all the animals Bill talked about, I became most interested in one he calls "the lost soul." No one knows for sure what this thing is or what it looks like. Many people (including Bill and his family) have heard it let out an eerie, wailing howl—always at night. The lost soul has even invaded the mission compound several nights, usually when it's raining. Whenever it lets go with that terrifying, soul-shattering cry, children run for their mothers and dogs crawl under the bed.

There are probably as many different versions on what the lost soul is as there are tribes in Assam. Some natives claim that it's one of their dear departed relatives returning to haunt them for having been wronged before death. Others, including those from the hill tribes, tell you that the lost soul is —or at least is a relative of—the Abominable Snowman. The Snowman, as you know, reputedly lives in the high mountains of Nepal, just across the border north of Assam.

Some say the lost soul is a cross between a black panther and a Himalayan brown bear. Still others—some of the braver tribesmen—insist that the lost soul is merely a constipated hyena.

The days slipped quickly by. Then one evening one of the boys showed up in camp with a piece of gaur horn about 12 inches long. A four-inch section at the end of the horn was intact; the rest of the fragment—about eight inches—was just a splinter of horn. The boy had found it in a spot where he said a big swath of vegetation had been ripped apart. Apparently two gaur bulls had fought a terrific battle, and one of them had left part of his fighting equipment. The boy estimated that the battle had happened about a week ago, so we didn't pay much attention.

In the gray dawn of the next day we found Larson's herd—all nine of them. As he'd reported, the herd bull was a beautiful creature, very large in body with an extraordinary horn, heavy around the base and beautifully formed.

We watched him for about 15 minutes from less than 100 yards as he maneuvered his harem of brown cows into heavier cover, and then followed quite nonchalantly, not the least bit worried about an elephant or the three odd-looking creatures on its back.

That afternoon we packed our duffel, tore down our tents and headed for Lakhimpur and the swamp country where we were going to hunt wild Asiatic buffaloes.

Why didn't I shoot the herd bull? You've probably guessed. His left horn had about four inches missing from the tip and was split another eight inches down the side. A perfectly beautiful trophy—a week ago.

Was it my old guna that had ruined this wonderful trophy? Who knows? But I like to think he was the one. I don't think he got that gash on his face playing football without a nose guard.

It's also interesting to speculate what course that hunt might have taken if those Indian customs and police officials hadn't held us up for five days THE END

I pose with my scar-faced gaur and .378 Weatherby that stopped him. His widest spread: 32½ inches; horns are 28½ and 28