

SOREHEAD

by CYRIL E. HOLLAND

Ordinarily India's jungle bears attack people only when startled at close range, but this one was mauling natives as if to get even

If Chandra, the poacher, hadn't gone hunting that night in early November I'd have avoided one of the closest shaves in my 25 years of big-game hunting in the jungles of south India.

But no jungle was too black, no outing too risky for this forest-bred native. As the owner of the only gun in the village, Chandra considered it only right and natural that he work as a poacher and sell illicit meat to his neighbors. So he was out hunting the scrub jungle behind the Nagapatata forest bungalow with his muzzle-loading, brass-bored shotgun. With luck, he'd get some kind of wild deer or pig. He'd settle for a hare or a porcupine.

Crossing an opening to investigate the sound of rustling leaves, Chandra met a big shaggy beast that let out a howl and came straight for him. The ancient muzzle-loader spat out flames, paper wad, and homemade slugs, but the beast kept coming. Its three-inch claws raked his skull and face. It bit into his shoulder and then, with the uncertain behavior of all its kind, turned and fled shrieking through the jungle.

Chandra staggered to his feet, patted his scalp into place, and crept back to the village dragging the gun behind him. He refused to be taken to the Chandragiri hospital a scant five miles away, for he feared his night mission would be questioned. How he lived to tell the tale, as he told it to me three months later, is in itself a miracle. He lost one eye and was otherwise too crippled to hunt again.

Chandra had blundered into a sloth bear, a shaggy, long-nosed, heavy-clawed bear native to India. At a distance, a sloth bear would look much like the black bears of North America, but the India animal typically has a white snout and a white mark on its chest.

Chamala Valley, about 120 miles northwest of my home in Madras city, was where this happened. Three months later I was called to the valley to settle a general panic touched off by Chandra's November ordeal.

All was quiet in the valley for about 10 days after Chandra fired his slugs. Then early one morning a police constable on leave was walking from Nagapatata to Bakharapet. A short mile past the Nagapatata forest bungalow a bear came out on the road. The constable stopped in his tracks, hoping the bear would cross the road and disappear. Instead it came shrieking toward him.

Police men here are issued heavy army-pattern hobnail boots. Being a wise man, this fellow removed his boots as

soon as he left town. He had them slung over his shoulder now. With the bear on top of him, he rammed the boots into the animal's face.

This probably saved his life. The bear's teeth crunched into the boots. The man's chest was badly clawed, but it was a hit-and-run attack. With hospital treatment, the victim's wounds were healed in two month's time.

Next to be attacked was a cattle boy. Natesan was 10 and his job was to drive some 20 head of cattle into the jungle each day to graze. Coming around a bend of a dry stream, Natesan noticed a peaben with some chicks and set out to catch one of the young ones. As he ran after the little balls of fluff a bear came out of the bamboo growing by the river and with a series of yowls started for Natesan.

Natesan had a good start, and with the quick-wittedness of his age he ran in amongst the cows. The bear came on, but was warded off by the bunched and defensive cattle. The smart youngster then drove the cattle out of the jungle to open ground near the forest bungalow.

Warnings mean very little to these people of the villages. "Well, it hasn't happened to me yet" seems to be their motto. So travelers continued to use the roads to Bakharapet and Pallibon; woodcutters went about their business; forest guards went about their duties. The bear laid three or four of them low before the people finally got frightened. It was at this stage—at the end of January—that Pedda Lingia, my Nagapatata tracker, caught a bus at Chandragiri and came 120 miles to Madras to give me the news.

I immediately got in touch with my friend Khasim, who was a district forest officer, and he confirmed the tales. He had, in fact, intended writing to me to come up and shoot the bear, as I'd previously shot the woman-eating tiger of Madaru for him. That settled it. (continued on page 114)

Flame from my rifle muzzle mixed with the sloth bear's hair on the last shot. Pat was ready with clubbed rifle

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For a number of reasons I usually hunt alone, but on this trip I planned to take along two companions, Pat Chambers and Ken Middleton. Pat is my nephew and at the time was 23. He's a crack shot with both rifle and shotgun. At Cudde, his school in England, he'd contributed considerably toward the team's success in the shooting eight for the Ashburton shield. With a pistol he'd won the medal presented, as I recall, by the Daily Mail. Ken, my brother-in-law, was 16 at the time. He was just "coming along" with us, though it was his job to shoot partridge and jungle fowl for the pot. Pat Chambers had a .404 Mauser, while I was armed with a .375 Maanlicher. The fourth one in the party was Ragavan, our camp cook.

Setting off in my coupé, we reached Nagapatala about noon, and I immediately contacted those who had been attacked. They were all convinced it was the same bear, and at each telling it grew larger and larger. Chandra, the poacher, became my technical adviser. As evidence of his own encounter with the bear I was hunting, he had one eyeless socket, bald patches on his pate as though a garden rake had been over it, and a chest on which the skin was deeply scarred and puckered.

Many problems faced us. The valley was about 30 square miles in area. There was more than one bear thereabouts, and I had not as yet seen tracks of the offender. But it was likely that the mauler would strike again. Besides, there were certain localities he was bound to visit—patches where jungle fruit grew, water holes, caves halfway up the hillside, and the roads.

The first evening Pat Chambers and I, along with Pedda the shikari, visited the area where Chandra had got his mauling. There was no sign of our friend the bear. I liked the look of the ground, however, and proposed to make it a favorite haunt of ours. There was a tank (lake) there that attracted game.

The following morning we visited the place again and found fresh bear tracks. They were smallish but had been made by a heavy animal, as they were deeply imprinted. Like hounds on the trail we traced the pugs out of that bit of jungle across the two roads to Bakharapet and Pullibonu—which were here only 100 yards apart—across the Kalayani stream, and back to the Pullibonu road once more. The trail went down the road for three or four miles and then up a steep hillside.

At last we crept up to a cave into which the tracks had disappeared, and climbed just above its mouth to lay our plans. Pedda was all for smoking the beast out, but I preferred a more subtle system. Asking Pat to take off his shirt, I tied it to a 10-foot pole which I got Pedda to cut quietly. Then Pedda wormed along on his stomach until he was overhanging the cave.

Pat Chambers was looking doubtful but I'd seen this ruse work before. When Pat and I were in position I

noded to Pedda Lingia and he lowered the shirt and waggled it in front of the cave mouth. There were several low grunts immediately. Then a paw made a grab at the shirt. This was withdrawn and a second later a black hairy mass shot out of the cave.

I was about to shoot when I saw why the prints had been small and yet deep. We'd followed a mother bear with twins, and she'd been carrying these on her back. This is the way our sloth bears carry their young, even when the babes are three or four months old. I shouted at Pat not to fire, and we let them go.

As we circled back toward the bungalow, all of us were talking about how much cold, pure water we'd drink as soon as we arrived. Ragavan the cook had been told to boil drinking water the night before and pour it into some earthenware pots. He was then to dampen the pots on the outside and stand them on the veranda in the night breeze. Servants in India are eager and obliging, but sometimes they try too hard to please.

At the bungalow, with us on his heels, Ragavan ran inside and produced water which was boiling hot. He'd gone one better than my instructions, for he'd boiled the water and immediately poured it into our vacuum flasks, imagining it would soon turn to ice water.

I saw a black cloud cover Pat's face. So did Ragavan, who beat a hasty retreat. Then we saw the funny side of it, but the waiting for more water to boil and cool was torture.

The next day we shot a bear. We went at first daylight to the place near the tank. As we approached this lake I suddenly saw the top of a jumjum fruit tree shake about 60 yards ahead. I hissed to stop my companions. Then we checked the wind and slipped up about 25 yards closer.

There were two sloth bears up the tree. I motioned Pat to take the lower one, as he seemed the larger of the two. Pat lifted his rifle and then lowered it again, shaking his head. He whispered that it was too dark to see his sights. I told him to wait, as the bears were quite unsuspecting and busily feeding.

The more I looked at the bigger one the nastier he seemed; he kept quarreling with his smaller companion. Then he settled down to sucking his paws. We could distinctly hear the peculiar sound, like that of bees in a hive that sloth bears make.

Pat kept checking his sights and at last touched off a shot that toppled the big bear out of the tree. With a howl the younger one scooted down bottom first and hit the ground almost as soon as his wounded companion.

The two bears then started a glorious scrap. Time and time again I've seen this happen, when one of a pair or group of bears has been wounded. As the bears tumbled about on the ground we tried to get our sights on them. Finally the bigger one stood on his hind legs for a moment and I let him have it. Over he went. The other bolted as fast as his legs could carry him.

We carefully moved up to the fallen beast and found him quite dead. He had

two bullet wounds. Pat's shot had grazed his chest; mine had hit his neck. Long hair gives the sloth bear a barrel-chested look that had fooled Pat, for I had omitted to tell him a bear's chest is flat like a human's.

Was this dead bear the killer? We examined him carefully, but could find no reason to suppose he was. The natives who later flocked to the bungalow to see the carcass were quite willing to believe that this was the local Jack the Ripper, but I told them not to be sure.

We all knew for certain a couple of days later. Returning to the bungalow in the evening, we saw a knot of natives gathered on the veranda. The center of attraction was a Gypsy woman with blood streaming down her face. She should have been wearing string upon string of glass beads but her neck was bare. She had one terrible gash running from her right shoulder down to the back of her hand. I could also see a bite on her hip just above the band of her pleated, low-hung skirt.

Her husband stood outside the veranda holding a donkey laden with odds and ends that included three fowls perched on top of the cargo. The husband told us a bear had attacked them on the Pullibonu road 300 yards north of our bungalow 45 minutes ago.

We put the woman in the car and took her and her husband down to the dispensary at Chandragiri. The donkey we handed over to someone else.

An hour later we were driving up and down the road in the dark but saw no sign of anything.

Early next morning we were on the spot where the woman had been mauled. The spot was marked by hundreds of bright beads strewn on the roadside. We found where the ground had been scratched up and also a faint track leading off the road, but though we ranged the countryside right up to the caves we saw neither hide nor hair of any bear.

I had sent out two men to build a machan (blind) in a tree overlooking a tiger kill we'd stumbled on the day before and at 4 p.m. we went to the spot. The tiger had returned sometime during the night and dragged the deer 20 or 30 yards, but had not eaten. Pat was keen to become a tiger hunter, so I agreed to wait in the machan on the chance the tiger would come back to feed after dark.

By 5 p.m. we were fairly well installed, with flashlights. Pat and I were up the tree. Pedda was waiting in the car about 300 yards away. At 7 p.m. I heard a sambar deer call. Soon, even nearer, a chital deer took up the warning of the tiger's approach.

Then a jeep whined up the road in second gear and spoiled it all. It was a government servant driving by in a jeep, and the noise disturbed the tiger. We heard the big cat moan two or three times. Then I faintly heard his last *A-o-u-a* a mile away in the Tirupati Temple direction.

It was now 8:30 p.m. I told Pat there was no point in waiting any longer. We scrambled down the tree and made

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for the car, where we found Pedda grumbling about the jeep and cursing government servants in general. Telling Pat to remain loaded, I handed my .375 rifle to Pedda, after slipping the bolt over the top cartridge for safety.

Both our rifles were fitted with flashlight holders, and since the holder on my rifle plays an important part in what followed, I'd best describe the gadget. It's shaped like a figure 8, with the top loop the diameter of a rifle barrel, and the lower loop the diameter of a flashlight. Joining the two loops together at the center is a screw with a butterfly nut. The flashlight lies alongside the barrel, and throws both sights and target into bold outline. When I handed my rifle to Pedda in the back of the coupé the light was fixed on firmly.

Driving slowly down the uneven Pulibonu track, we neared the third milestone from our bungalow when I saw a dark shape under the shadows of the trees lining the road. Pedda saw it at the same time and called "Karadi" (bear).

The bear was perhaps 100 yards down the road. I accelerated for about 40 yards, then hit the brakes and yelled at Pat to fire. He leaped out of the car door, and I waited for the shot. It was so slow in coming that I jumped out too and reached for my own rifle, which Pedda was holding. As I was getting it out of the car I heard Pat's .404 crash, and the bear started to run across the road. I raised my rifle.

And then everything went wrong.

Pedda Lingia with the idle curiosity of his kind had loosened the butterfly nut of the flashlight holder, and as I whipped up the rifle the flashlight started to swing round and round the barrel. Seeing that the light was now quite useless, I jumped to the front of the car and knelt under the headlights. I knew I was now clearly visible to the bear, and he turned at my first shot and came straight for me.

Pat fired again, but the bear now came on all the faster, letting out shrieks and roars. We started rapid fire at him, but still he came on. The lights seemed to double his size, and black shadows played tricks with my eyes. I knew he'd been hit hard several times and was probably running automatically. I also knew how difficult it is to stop a big animal in that condition.

"Get in the car!" I snapped to Pat, and as he jumped in I turned and grabbed the handle of the other door.

My door was locked on the inside! The bear was almost on me now and yelling blue murder.

There are possibly more fancy tales told about sloth bears than any other denizen of our jungles. Some natives believe that male bears kidnap their women, and it's whispered of many an unattractive villager that his father was a bear. The sloth bear is hardly more aggressive than the other animals of the wild, however. Their danger lies in the fact that they're almost deaf. Lying under some bush or rock, a bear will let some unsuspecting human almost

step on him. The startled bear probably thinks he's fighting for his own life when he comes out clawing and biting. To the human, it may seem to be an unprovoked attack.

Sloth bears charge on all fours until right up to the victim. Then they often rear up five or six feet high and attack the face. Many persons recover from a mauling, but the appearance of anyone who's been attacked by a sloth bear is, to say the least, unpleasant.

Now I had no choice but to face this bear, and in the excitement I'd not counted the number of rounds I'd fired. It was either four or five. If five, my rifle was empty and my mauling was coming.

Pat had seen my fix and popped out of the car again to fire his last shot. In the same second I poked my rifle barrel right against the bear's Adam's apple and pulled the trigger.

I saw the flame from the muzzle of the .375 get mixed up with the hair on the bear's neck. Then he crashed into me and over I went. Young Pat came running with his rifle held club fashion, but there was no need. Either his last shot or mine had killed the brute instantly. I believe my bullet hit him when he was already dead.

We found a recently healed scar along the top of the bear's head, like a center parting. It looked as though it had been a very ugly wound, and I believe it was caused by a slug from the muzzle-loader of Chandra the poacher.

On skinning the animal next day, we found that Pat and I had hit it eight times in vital places. For both young Pat and Ken, who were on their first big-game hunt, this was a good opening lesson on the vitality of animals.

Villagers from miles around came to see the beast which had caused so much havoc. A village band and dancers put on a performance for us as we presented the fat and certain parts of the anatomy to Chandra the poacher. He was the architect of the havoc and first victim of the bear, which is still spoken of in those parts as the bear with the headache. 188 188

Vancouver Tyees

More lakes, streams, rivers, and waterfalls are to be found in British Columbia's Vancouver Island than in any other area of its size in the world, it is claimed. The mouths of the Campbell, Courtenay, Salmon, and some of the smaller rivers give unexcelled fishing for the big and gamy-type salmon. The lakes and streams afford excellent sport with rainbows and cutthroats.

July through September is the season for tyee fishing. Campbell River, Comox on the Courtenay, and Sayward on the Salmon are headquarters for the sport. Comfortable accommodations are available at reasonable rates.

There is Canadian Pacific steamer service from Vancouver to Nanaimo, thence bus service to Campbell River. From Victoria on the island there is daily bus service to Campbell River; also daily (except Sunday) train service to Courtenay, from which place there is bus service to Campbell River.