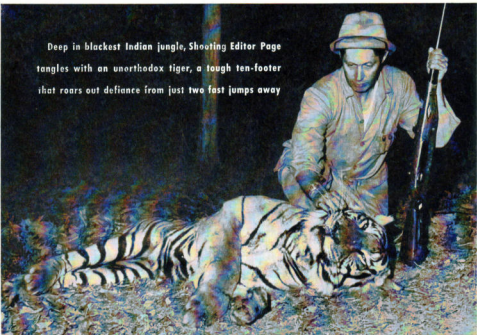


Facing Striped Death

By WARREN PAGE

Deep in blackest Indian jungle, Shooting Editor Page tangles with an unorthodox tiger, a tough ten-footer that roars out defiance from just two fast jumps away



When you shoot a tiger from the ground at forty feet, in the dark, you'll pull the dead killer's whiskers gingerly. At least I did

IT'S the unorthodox that a hunter remembers. Not the sticker-horned goat he tumbled after a climb, a stalk and a shot strictly by the book, but the bull moose that came blundering into camp and caught him with his pajamas on. Geese I've crumpled when we were shooting out of goose pits are blurred recollections, but the pair of honkers that swerved into a mallard pot-hole where no goose had a right to be—I can still hear them splash. It was something like that on the tigers. Already the kill by the rules is less vivid than the big cat I collected in a way to give orthodox tiger-slayers fits. Gave me a mild fit too, afterward.

Not that the orthodox tiger wasn't up to expectations. The build-up on him had started before I clambered aboard a TWA Constellation at Idlewild, and hadn't slowed too much during ructions with boars on the marshy plains of Iraq. Even while I was up near Taurengs in north-central India propping an ungodly big buffalo with horns like the walking beam on an old-fashioned steamboat, the dream-pictures of the tiger-

to-be kept spinning in ever brighter colors. And when he finally slipped out through the bamboo—ten feet of striped menace, smooth as smoke—he was well worth ten thousand miles of travel. But he was an orthodox tiger, and he met his end in an orthodox way.

We had been in camp at Somanpalli, down in the Ghanda section that Jim Corbett made famous with his books on tiger adventure, for three days without report of a tiger kill. Camp is really a misnomer, because shikar operations outfitted by Allwyn Cooper, Ltd., of Nagpur are luxuriously housed either in forest bungalows or in tents the size of those Rudolph Valentino used to chase Vilma Banky around in. But despite the comfort, and despite the fact that I'd already lucked onto and smashed a great hulk of a sladang that stood over six feet in his white stockings—which is quite another story—the itch for a tiger grew stronger by the minute. And that itch wasn't quieted any by a visit from a young missionary quartered at Siroecha, a few miles up the line. He casually reported that a local tiger



The daytime tiger was a huster, ten feet long and heavy with his belly full of buffalo, but he was an orthodox tiger and met his orthodox end in a beat straight out of the book. And he went to camp in classical fashion, lashed on a *chopai*

had gone sour, turned man-eater and chewed up all of a teen-age girl save her feet and ears.

"Sahib, you must be patient!" soothed Khan Sahib Jamahed Butt, the portly Moslem who as head shikari was running the show. "Eleven fat buffalo are the baits each night you sleep. Soon we must have a kill. It is cool here at the dak bungalow, and the *chaukidar* must run here with news of a tiger soon."

With a hundred and fifty-odd cats to his own credit, plus several hundred others slain by the parties he'd guided over the past thirty years, I knew Khan Sahib merited the "Honored Sir" style of title the English officers had dubbed him with, but hopeful "musts" and soft words didn't quell my restlessness. It didn't ease until the runners poured in the fourth morning to report on baits scattered strategically as far as a dozen miles out. They gasped the news that not one but three tigers had made kills the night before. Then the itch became a frenzy. Three at once was laying it on a bit thick.

The report on the first kill upset our only bottle of mercurochrome. It came in while I was patching up the forehead of a young Gond who'd battled our regular punkah boy for the privilege of swinging the sahib's ceiling fan during the 120-degree heat of midday. The two other reports following hot after upset the entire camp. Kill No. 3, we decided, since it was nine miles away, would have to be left overnight, but with hurry it might be possible to make beats on the two kills nearer camp. Gears howling, one of our jeeps whipped off toward the village of Aser Ali to recruit extra beaters from the *kalari*, or wineshop, there.

Locating tiger No. 1, the orthodox tiger, was a cinch. Near his kill was the only water hole for miles, and

beyond it a long thicket of dense bamboo made cover for a digestive snooze after his gorge of young water buffalo. Before ten o'clock we had a machan lashed where my rifle could cover the nullah banks that created a small opening below his likely hide-out. Soon after ten a hundred and forty beaters filed off through the teak with their tomahawk-style axes and water gourds, wizened oldsters and lithe boys, to be spotted for the beat by an assistant shikari. Stops were already positioned up trees in a line extending either side of the machan. They were ready to clap or knock on the tree trunk should the tiger appear before them, to nudge him either back into the beat or nearer the *Sitrplatz* where I stubbed out a last cigarette and checked the fat Silvertips in my .375 Weatherby.

The whole beat proceeded by the book. Even before the combination of excitement and sun cutting down the jungle had me fully sweating, before the cries and drum-thumps of the beaters had really begun, we watched a procession of game. First, sambar—three of these elk-sized deer—crashed out through the underbrush and past the silent stops. Then peafowl pattered down through the dry teak leaves like running pheasants. The cocks burst into flight as they left the bamboo, whipping ten pounds of bird and seven feet of tail feathers through the branches like grouse, zeppelin-sized grouse gone daft. Then a family of langur monkeys swung along, cussing humanity in general and beaters in particular. One gray-muzzled grandfather swayed into our tree, I think deliberately, to comment on the probable ancestry of white men who stirred up the jungle quiet. Then the tiger.

Before we had spotted the machan, Khan Sahib and



High in a teak tree we lashed the photographer's machan, but the canny tiger stayed in bamboo, away from the lens

I had discussed *ster's* probable escape route. The shikari, with all the pomp of long experience, had stated categorically that the tiger would emerge from the bamboo at one specific point, probably come toward us down the ravine, or nullah, a few paces and there show in the clear for a shot.

And so he did. Stripes on rich tan-yellow camouflaged him in the bamboo clumps until the last moment, and I saw him drifting along only a few steps before he oozed over the nullah bank and paused on the sand. Instinctively I settled the crosshairs of my 2½X just where those stripes spread over the swell of shoulder muscle.

Sure of this tiger, we had set up another machan about fifty yards to the right, to give clear vision for still-photographer Scheidegger and mine host Vidya Shukla with his 16 mm. But to stand clear for their lenses, the tiger would have to pad another ten or fifteen yards down the ravine. So I waited, sweating. But not that day—the opening ahead of the tiger was no place for a smart old tomcat, whereas the thicket to the left of the nullah definitely offered him cover. As he made up his mind and turned I pressed the final ounces on the trigger, and the magnum whopped a slug into ten feet of cat.

No roars, no charge, no struggle, no heroics. Just sudden death. Even a tiger dies fast when two and a half tons of bullet energy explodes itself in the right spot, blasting slivers down into the lungs and chunks through backbone.

The only thing unorthodox about this tiger, I suppose, was that he showed clear at ninety yards of range instead of the usual thirty or (Continued on page 126)



On a shikar run by Allwyn Cooper, life is easy in a forest bungalow, with a cool porch for checking rifles



The midnight tiger may have been the man-eater that chewed up a girl—at least our punkah boy thought so



Semarwalli men left, Aser Ali men right. The beaters earn royal pay, a rupee (two bits), for driving a tiger

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forty. I knew that tiger was cold turkey because the sights had been dead right, and we shinned down to inspect the orthodox kill.

A full-ruffed ten-footer he was, big and heavy, over a quarter ton with all that buffalo inside him, his tail and hind quarters still wet from lying in the cool jungle pool. Handsome, toothy and very imposing. When he was lashed to the cot, or *chapei*, that had been our *machan*, the army of beaters lugged him to the jeep, gabbing about what a *bura bheri* *sher* he was. Very orthodox, and very dead.

"What about the second kill?" I asked Vidya as we jeeped toward Somanpalli along the fire lanes that checkerboard India's teak forests. "Time enough for him?" It would be an accomplishment to bag two trophy tigers in one day.

Both Vidya and Manohar Lal, the English-speaking assistant shikari, felt that was doubtful. The beaters would have to hustle six or seven miles to the area of the second kill, and a drive couldn't be started before three or more likely four in the afternoon. By then tiger No. 2 would have finished his snooze and might move. Oversized pug marks showed this was a trophy animal, likely the same tiger that had for several years prowled the banks of the Idrawati east of Somanpalli village.

We tried, but it was a bust. The tiger may not have been in the beat. Even before it started, excited *cu-k-cu-k* and the beat of peacock wings far behind the stops had told of some predator on the move. Or perhaps he was in the beat, and the promise of a rupee (slightly less than two bits) was not enough to pull the half-naked tribesmen through the dense cover where the tiger was lying up. They slipped around its edges. And why not? As the *mukia-dom*, or headman, of Aser Ali explained, two years before a forest official had tried for this tiger. The beast had escaped his fire by roaring back through the line of beaters, savagely crippling two men who had stood petrified in his path. The Somanpalli villagers knew and feared this cat, not because he had regularly killed their cattle or attacked humans, neither of which is normal to the average tiger, but because he had been seen many times by women who bore water jugs from the river.

Trying to move the third tiger, whose pug marks near the kill were small, those of either a female or a young male and in neither case a trophy, was likewise a bust the next day. We could not box her between stops and beaters for a show before the cameras. Perhaps the first one had been too easy. Night after night went by without another attempt on our wide-scattered tiger baits. No reports of natural kills of sambar or the whitetail-sized deer called *chital* came in, and the *Sironcha* man-eater had apparently gone on a diet. The *doldrums* had set in.

In May, south Chanda is furnace-hot all day. In the cool mornings we hunted horse-headed nilgai and sambar, took pictures of gaur, and warmed shotgun barrels on the four species of dove that dip over India's fields and jungles in countless millions; but only mad dogs and fools would hunt hard in the

120-degree midday blaze. That was siesta time for everybody, especially the game. But at night the jungle came alive. Then we could stir our own cool breeze by jeeping the trails or sit stone-still over pools where a cat or a sloth bear might come to drink. The first of my leopards came from such a midnight tear, a handsome spotted tom, 7 feet 5 inches from whiskers to tail. And an unexpected bonus beast arrived to jangle our nerves.

It started innocently enough. Over in Sironcha, one of our jeep trailers had been left in the hands of a native blacksmith for repairs. And from that larger village I could send out mail by runner. Reasons enough to head a jeep that way, with Manohai Lal to drive, the .375 between my knees just in case, and Hamid, the willing but forever fumble-fingered Hamid, riding behind with a spotlight, just in case. The switch on the light had gone kaput the night before, and Hamid could keep it boring into the wall of jungle only by holding one wire against a screw head with a shaky finger, but that precarious rig was no great concern. We'd probably see only the odd chital feeding in a clear spot anyway, or find a billi, the small dun-colored jungle cat, watching us green-eyed before slipping into the brush. It would be just a cool ride, unless we happened onto one of the predator cats that can be shot under lights. That every jounce of the jeep jiggled Hamid's finger off the wire probably wouldn't matter anyway.

It was fine, with our self-created breeze flapping my shirt as we bumped along. Not a care in the world, not even when Manohai Lal said, "Sahib, the chaukidar has told me that a foolish Gond who dared drive his oxcart on this Sironcha road after sunset saw a tiger near the eighth milepost. A large tiger who crossed the road and made the sound of k-rrr-o-o-o-ua!"

But it was too comfortably cool even to think hard about that. The villagers were forever reporting game they had seen, or dreamed they had seen, like the sloth bear that came and drank every night, yet somehow or other left no tracks. In the black cool of near-midnight, just riding down the headlight-tunnel was enough.

But a few furlongs short of milepost ten there was a sudden blur of movement in the jungle off right of our trail. It was a big blur, a bumpy-trotting blur that I saw carried stripes even as Manohai tramped on the jeep brakes and Hamid swung the light that way. Big as a cow it looked in the depths of the teak, but there was no mistaking that cat movement. It was a tiger.

We stopped and he stopped, and for a moment as dust welled up from the jeep tires I could see nothing. Had he turned? Hamid laid the light beam steady along my pointing finger where that striped bulk had disappeared, near the two-foot trunk of a ghost-white gow tree forty feet away. No eyes burned in its path.

Knowing I was a fool to tangle with a tiger only two easy jumps away, in jungle edge that would go black as pitch if Hamid's excited finger should quiver off that wire, I did the foolish but automatic thing. I eased over out of the jeep and with the rifle centered on that tree side-stepped five, ten, twenty, twenty-five feet clear of the

little car. If the light stayed on and the tiger moved from behind the big tree, I'd see him, and with a 'scope there'd be no need for light along the rifle barrel. Light on the target would be enough to show the crosshairs against striped-yellow cat hide. If the light stayed on, that is.

Our small world of trail and jungle was dead-quiet save for the jeep engine, still ticking over. Manohai had either forgotten to switch it off, or had ideas about a quick get-away. Not that any get-away could be fast enough to beat the tiger if he forced the issue or I made a bad shot. Quiet. And then I could see whiskers and black-yellow ruff edging the fat gow trunk. Not yet.

The cruel round head showed and eyes glared green. Still not yet. A badly placed bullet might only wound. Then the huge cat took a full stride. The base of the neck and shoulder loomed fair. My rifle blasted once and the world spun in a chaos of recoil, muzzle flame and roaring, spinning tiger.

According to all the books by the English sportsmen and professionals who have hunted tiger, the big cat always jumps in the direction he's facing when hit. Orthodox tigers, that is. But this one wasn't orthodox. Had he been, or had Hamid slipped his finger off the wire, this story might be a post mortem not on a tiger, but on me. When the 300-grain pill tore into him just where the strange lucky bones lie concealed in a tiger's forequarters, this particular *sher* leaped backward. In a convulsive spring he whirled into a back somersault, feet and head and stripes and tail spinning crazily a full twenty feet, into the faint edge of the jeep lights.

And as he hit the ground he roared again and gathered his hindquarters for the two fast jumps that would bring him to claw-reach of the man-thing whose bullet had ripped into him. But Hamid had—bless his soul—for once swung the light fast, and I flipped the bolt and swung the rifle fast. Even as the great cat recovered I drove another slug behind where those eyes glared round and green. It smashed into shoulder and withers, and the unorthodox tiger coughed into death.

But we stood for minutes and watched the eyes until they seemed dimmer and it was safe to move in those few feet and toss a stick at the tiger's body. No telling what this sort of *bheri sher* might do. He didn't go by the rules.

"*Sahib achha nibhana lagata hai!*" shouted the jubilant Hamid, and would have pounded my shoulders had that been Hindu usage. But I understood from his tone and gestures, and I knew that it was not only my quick shooting but his fast handling of that spotlight that had kept us from being candidates for either tetanus shots or pine boxes.

The three men who had shared an unorthodox adventure dragged that full-ruffed tiger to the jeep to pry and strain all 600 sagging pounds of him, even longer and heavier than the orthodox cat I'd bagged the week before, up across the rear seats. All three shared the acclaim of Sironcha village when we drove in seeking the blacksmith and car trailer and the people of Sironcha saw the whopping male *sher* behind us. They seemed to feel this was the man-eater that had taken the little girl from their fields. But I don't know that this is so. Or that it isn't, either.