ILLUSTRATED BY
JOHN McDERMOTT

As the killer threw up his great head and stared into the blinding light, I found the spot I had been looking for

TIGER BAIT

by CHARLEY VORM

The game had to end. I was sick of playing mouse to those murderous Himalayan cats. But the question was—who'd win?

Tigers, returning to their kills to feed, usually approach through the thickest cover available. We hoped ours would do the same, and we were waiting for it. The kill, a scrawny old cow staked out for bait, lay in a narrow game path in a dense belt of jungle less than 10 paces from the edge of a tea-plantation clearing. The tea workers had told us that a big male, a female, and two half-grown cubs laired there regularly. One had killed the cow between midnight and daybreak, and dragged it to the spot. Whichever of them returned for a meal, we thought, would come through the thick grass and bush, and we probably wouldn't see it until it was actually on the kill.

The place was a good one to sit up over bait, but there were no trees in which we could put a platform or machan. Nor was there a suitable spot to build a lookout on bamboo poles. So Jack Girsham, our Anglo-Burmese outfitter and shikari (roughly the Indian equivalent of an African white hunter) decided to dig a pit at the edge of the clearing and have it face down the game trail. We'd sit in it and watch. It would be kind of like hunkering down in a duck blind, except that the decoy would be closer and the prey would be a North Indian tiger instead of a flight of greenheads.

To make the prospect more exciting, two headmen from a near-by village had come to our camp a few days before to tell us that a man-eating tiger was on the prowl. Apparently a newcomer to the area, it already had killed and devoured a cowherd and badly mauled a villager. Could we do anything to help?

When we said we'd try, the headmen led us to a small patch of thick jungle where they told us the tiger was making his headquarters. Girsham posted Scott Hayes, my hunting partner, and me, on stands at the narrow end. We'd picked up a couple of elephants for transport purposes, and one was trained for hunting. So Girsham used him and our two Indian shikaris, Rham Sing and Manghu, in an effort to drive the tiger out and give us a shot.

They drove him out, all right, and we heard him cough and snort as he smashed through the dry grass. But he was wary of a trap, and instead of breaking out in the open he circled the elephant and made a clean get-away. When Girsham went in the thick stuff to see where the tiger had been hiding, he found a human hand.

Though we'd heard no further reports of the tiger, so far as we knew he was still in that same patch of jungle. But man-eaters, like other tigers, move around, and there was no way of knowing whether or not this was the same animal we hoped to ambush from our pit. If he was, and if he came on us in the blind, he might not bother with the dead cow at all.

We finished the pit at dusk and were arranging a grass screen in front of it when we heard the faint rustle of an animal moving in thick cover about 40 feet away. Girsham whispered that it might be the tiger coming to investigate the disturbance near his kill. But when nothing further developed after a few minutes, Manghu and I crawled into the pit and the others left. Manghu, who carried no gun, had lived among tigers all his life, and I respected his knowledge of them.

At dark two small barking deer began calling each other, one on either side of the game trail. They closed in on us, and as I listened to them I knew there'd be nothing to worry about while they were around. They'd clear out in a hurry if a tiger came near. That's what I figured, but it didn't turn out that way.

I sat, relaxed and drowsy, for maybe an hour. The deer continued their conversation as they *(continued on page 68)*

The next thing Manghu and I heard was the slow and heavy breathing of the tiger right behind us. He'd stalked us, and he had us dead to rights

moved deeper in the jungle. Then, without any warning at all, a deep-throated, ear-splitting roar ripped the night apart. It came from a clearing not six feet behind the pit, and the force of it seemed to lift my scalp.

I'd heard big-game animals roar before. One night on the Ugalla River in Tanganyika a lion let loose within two paces of my tent, shaking the canvas with a series of thunderous chords. But that was different. I knew the lion wasn't stalking me, but I couldn't be sure about the tiger. There's a devilish cunning about Stripes that no other big cats have, and their contempt for man is thinly veiled. Once they get your number they have no fear of you.

I expected the tiger to leap on us immediately after that hellish roar, but I didn't give him the chance. I jumped out of the pit and swiveled around all in one motion, flipping on the switch of the three-cell flashlight clipped to the barrel of my .470 Westley Richards double rifle. As its light stabbed out over the clearing I heard a heavy animal running, but I couldn't make out whether he was going or coming. When the beam failed to pick him out I realized we'd called his bluff. Manghu and I knew he wouldn't be back that night, so we took off for camp. We found his tracks on the road leading to the village.

Piecing the evidence together next morning, we concluded that our roaring visitor undoubtedly was the same animal we'd heard moving around while we were putting the finishing touches to the pit. Apparently he'd circled the place trying to find out what was going on, and finally had come up behind us. Not liking what he saw, he let go his blood-curdling yowl and lit out.

I'd had my fill of hunting from a pit. It was too much like being trapped in a rat hole, and I told Girsham at breakfast that hereafter I'd do my waiting in a machan. Though I still prefer platforms for this type of hunting, I soon was to discover that they offer no greater sense of security.

Scott Hayes and I were established in a permanent camp in the foothills of the Himalayas, 45 miles north of Tezpur in the province of Assam in northeastern India. Tibet was just beyond the first range of mountains to the north, and the Bhutan border was within walking distance to the west, both forbidden territories.

Compared with the comforts and luxuries of the three African safaris I'd taken previously, this was a primitive hunt. We were quartered in huts made of bamboo and straw which offered no resistance to the raw, chill winds of late January. The days were warm, but at nights the temperatures dropped below freezing. We soon took to sleeping in woolen underwear and heavy shirts, and wore wool stocking caps over our heads.

Our foot lockers hadn't been sent up from Tezpur, so we were doing without many things we needed and wanted. We also washed our own laundry, built our fires, and lugged our rifles through the jungles every day. But Scott had shot a young bison the first day in camp, and I'd dropped a big sambar a few days later. Our cook did a good job on both, and we were eating well.

Camp was near a tea plantation operated by a Scotch family named Smith whose hospitality exceeded anything I've run into anywhere. They invited us to stay with them overnight on our way to camp, and later sent a truck to Tezpur for our stuff. When our hunt threatened to bog down for lack of bait cows, they scouted up three from the native village.

We staked the cows in places where we found tiger trails and where the villagers said tigers hunted regularly. Scott and I sat up night after night in machans built over the cows, and the tigers came. But they didn't come close enough. Scott heard one prowling around his bait, and the cow I was watching one night made a terrific racket trying to break loose. She'd apparently winded a tiger, but he resisted the temptation to take her.

A tiger tried to break into the village cowshed. We heard the uproar when the natives shouted him off, and we also heard his defiant roar as he retreated. But luck was against us. We tried tethering the bait cows and leaving them unwatched. The strategy was to let the stripers make their kills undisturbed, and then to sit up over the carcasses the following night. Half the plan worked. The tigers killed all three cows, but they neglected to come back to feed while we were in the machans.

Scott finally shot a leopard, and maybe that broke the jinx. At any rate, the Smiths sent word next morning that a tiger had broken into their cowshed during the night and carried off a cow. Evidently it was a big tiger, for he'd hauled off his victim bodily without dragging it. Girsham and I found the kill later in almost impenetrable growth half a mile from the plantation.

Again there were no trees growing near by that could

TIGER BAIT

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It took six natives to haul the 500-pound brute 2½ miles back to camp. Boy bringing up the rear is toting a hunk of bamboo

hold a machan, so Jack set about building one of bamboo poles. He placed it in thick brush where I would have a wedge-shaped view from the platform to the kill. When the machan was lashed in place it was about 7½ feet above the ground, well shielded by the undergrowth, and about 20 yards from the dead cow.

Manghu and I climbed onto it at dusk. There was no moon, and once the night set in it was very dark indeed. I've killed all of Africa's dangerous game and none, not even elephants which I rate tops, ever tightened my nerves the way this nocturnal tiger hunting did. It's a spooky business, gives you a clammy, sitting-duck sort of feeling.

After about an hour of silent watching Manghu and I heard a faint swishing of grass. A tiger was circling the kill. It's incredible that such a big animal, even though a cat, can move through thick, dry cover so silently. The jungle was compact and dense, higher than a man's shoulders, yet we heard only a soft rustling such as a rabbit might make, and now and then the snap of a stem under an unseen foot.

The sound stopped. I sat, tense and alert, trying to make my eyes penetrate the darkness and hoping to catch a shadowy movement near the kill. I saw nothing. Then, startlingly loud and close, I heard the crunching of bones, and knew the tiger was on the kill.

I raised the .470 slowly, soundlessly, aiming as best I could in the direction of the noise. When I thought I was on target I pressed the flashlight's button, and a pencil of white light pierced the darkness.

The kill lay in tall grass, and only a part of its body was visible. The light found it, but there was no tiger, no movement, nothing to shoot at. Again the night was still as a grave. Then, while the torch still exposed the kill in strong, black-shadowed relief, I heard the sound of bones being crushed in grass three or four feet to one side. Apparently the tiger had grabbed himself a big hunk of meat just before I switched on the light, and he wasn't going to withdraw until he'd finished it.

After a minute or two he stopped eating, and we heard no more. But he was far from through. About 15 minutes later we heard him tearing at the cow again, and I switched the light on. Nothing. He performed once more, with exactly the same results. Either he was extra hungry or the most persistent cat I've ever met. When the light had driven him off the third time I was sure we'd heard the last of him. But I was wrong.

We waited some more—it seemed like an eternity—and then detected a soft, stealthy padding in the grass to our right. It stopped, and for long minutes there was no sound at all. The next thing Manghu and I heard was the slow and heavy breathing of the tiger, coming from right behind our machan.

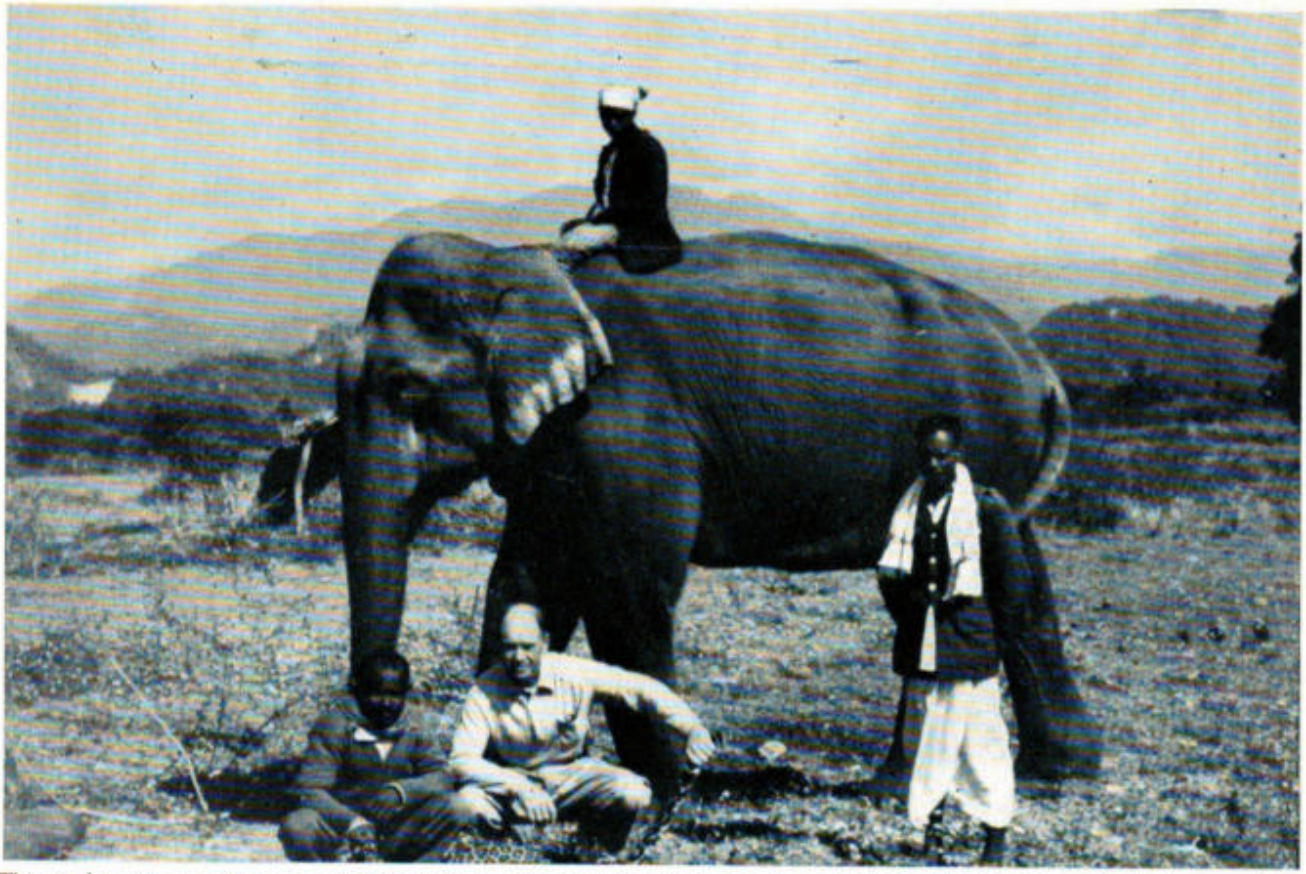
He'd stalked us, and now he had us dead to rights. He could be up on the machan in one slashing leap. We had to assume he meant business, and if he did there wasn't a chance in the world of my pivoting around, switching on the light, and getting off a shot in time to stop him.

There was just one thing to do, and we did it. We sat motionless, hardly breathing, and listened to the deep, regular inhalations and exhalations of the big cat. I could have reached over and almost touched him with the barrels of the .470.

The worst part was having our backs to him. I fought down an almost uncontrollable impulse to whirl around, face him, and try in some crazy fashion to shoot if he jumped. The machan trembled slightly, and I realized it was my unarmed friend Manghu shaking like a leaf. I wanted to say something to him, to snap him out of his panic, and to warn him not to cry out. But I didn't dare even whisper.

It occurred to me suddenly that my right leg was dangling over the edge of the platform, and that my foot could hardly be more than a few feet from the tiger's head. I wondered whether he might grab it and pull me down instead of coming up on the machan after us. And most of all, I wondered whether he was already a man-eater or an ordinary tiger about to become one.

I don't know how long he stayed there. Probably not more than 10 minutes, maybe only five, but we didn't hear



This is the transport elephant, trained to hunt, that drove the man-eater from his lair. But the big cat fooled us even then

him leave. After a while the heavy breathing wasn't there any more, and we knew he'd gone.

We waited about half an hour, and when we heard no more we slid from the machan and headed for camp. Once clear of the jungle and on a path we knew, we hotfooted it. Manghu was scared almost witless, and I prefer not to discuss my own condition. I've hunted a lot of dangerous game without turning a hair, but that session convinced me that tiger hunting at night can be the ultimate test for nerves.

Next morning we went back to the kill to look things over, and decided to build another machan on the opposite side, where I'd have a better view of the bait and the approaches to it. What's more, if the tiger came back looking for us he wouldn't find us in the same place. Manghu had no enthusiasm for the job, but when I made ready to leave camp an hour before dusk he came along, unarmed as always.

The new machan was six inches nearer the ground than the old one. Otherwise it was about the same set-up, a frail shelf on bamboo stilts and just big enough for two men to sit on. But at least I could see the entire kill from it, and if Stripes came in to feed all I'd need was one chance.

Darkness fell over the jungle soft and black, and it shrouded us for a tense but uneventful hour. The first sound we picked up was a faint rustle of dry grass off to the left. It wasn't repeated. Then, with the abrupt and terrifying suddenness of an exploding grenade, hell broke loose directly under the machan.

There was a growling, spitting, slapping, and thumping that almost lifted me straight up. It sounded like a loud and horrible cat fight, and it took me three or four seconds to figure out what was going on. Then I realized that two half-grown tiger cubs were having a free-for-all beneath us. At the same time it dawned on me that their mother wouldn't be far away. Remembering the ways of all she-cats with their young, I knew we were in for trouble.

A cub bumped into one of the bamboo poles supporting the machan, and for a second I thought the whole works would collapse and dump us in the middle of the fracas. Before the platform stopped shimmying I found out exactly where mamma was when she reached over and gave one of the cubs a swipe that sent him rolling end over end. She, as well as the kids, was directly under us.

Her discipline quieted the youngsters, and for some minutes we heard no more from them. Then our ears caught the tigress' slow and heavy breathing, and we also heard the cubs playing quietly in front of us.

It was the night before all over again, only worse. The mother tiger wasn't six feet from our rumps. If we moved an inch there was every reason to expect she might think her cubs were in danger and take offensive action. She could be on the platform or pull the whole thing down before I could point my rifle at her. A machan's floor may be insubstantial, but you can't aim a gun and torch through one and hope for a hit.

She had us treed, and she kept us treed for the longest two hours of my life. I can't explain it. Though we kept as quiet and motionless as it's possible for humans to be, we had to breathe and our hearts had to beat. Yet she never noticed us. It's hard to believe she could have been so near and not scented us, poor as the tiger's nose is. But she didn't. All I can say is that I don't think she ever knew we were there.

I still can't figure out why she brought the cubs there at all, for the three of them left without going to the kill. But I didn't let that worry me, and after giving them plenty of time to put distance between us, Manghu and I climbed down and took off for camp on the double. When we got there I shook Girsham awake and told him that I was through playing tiger bait. "No more machans seven feet off the ground," I announced firmly. "In future any platform I sit on will be up where I can see it before any tigers get a chance to chew my legs off." I backed down on that later, though.

The next few days were discouraging. Scott shot at a rogue elephant that was tearing things up at the tea plantation, but didn't make a kill. The bull took off for the

In his death throes the wounded tiger had angrily ripped at a forepaw with his teeth, even crushing some of the bones

foothills, and we lost the track after trailing him for a couple of hours. The tigers refused to co-operate, though one gave Scott a bad start by circling him and coming up behind, then taking off with a spine-chilling roar. Our time was running out, and both of us faced the disheartening prospect of leaving India without killing a tiger.

Then one morning, at the edge of a jungle about two miles from camp, Rham Sing and I stumbled onto a place where a bullock had been killed. Judging from the looks of things, it was unquestionably a tiger's doing for the animal had been dragged a good distance. We had no trouble following the drag through 10-foot grass, but after 300 yards of it we came to an extremely dense thicket. Rham Sing jerked to a stop, pointed silently into the grove, and then touched his nose. I smelled, as he did, the strong feral scent of a tiger's lair at very close range. Stripes made no sound, but it was evident we were probably less than a dozen paces from him.

To go a step farther into that blind, evil-smelling place would have been suicide, so we retreated cautiously and returned to camp to report. When Girsham and Rham Sing went back after lunch to investigate, they found that the tiger had moved the bullock, snaking it out of the thicket into more open grass. They drove him off and knocked together a machan in a tree several yards from the kill. Jack took pains to place the platform a good 10 feet off the ground.

About 5 o'clock that afternoon I walked out to the place alone since I saw no reason for putting either of our native shikaris through the ordeal of sitting up with me. If a tiger was to be killed I meant to kill it, and I could do it just as well on my own.

When I arrived at the spot I noticed that Stripes had polished off most of the bullock. Only the ribs and a few fragments of bones remained, and as I climbed into the machan I wondered whether there was enough of a meal left to tempt the tiger to return.

I made myself comfortable on the platform and waited while the last minutes of daylight ebbed slowly away. A velvety darkness clothed the jungle, and the small night noises began. I listened hard for the faint rustle of dry grass or the soft pad of big feet. After the disturbance of the afternoon, I reasoned, if the tiger came at all he'd probably circle the entire layout before venturing in to feed. Half an hour after dark the moon climbed over the hills, flooding the night with a silver radiance that made it possible for me to see almost as well as by daylight.

I was mentally figuring the distance between myself and that small, grisly mound of bones when I heard what I'd been listening for—a faint crackling sound about 100 yards to my right. A tiger was coming. In a few minutes the sound was repeated directly in front of me and then, after a pause, I heard him moving on my left where a narrow path led through the tall grass.

I've never seen such caution and cunning. The tiger took only a step or two at a time, then stopped and listened. Then ahead again—almost noiselessly. He was close enough to me now so that I could follow his slow progress toward the bullock's remains.

Breathing shallowly and holding myself rigid as a statue, I glued my eyes to the shadowy spot where the path broke the wall of grass just beyond the pile of bones. Suddenly an enormous striped head took form there, appearing by itself as if floating in shade. It stayed there for fully a minute, its eyes glancing furtively here and there while studying the kill and the surroundings. Then the head came forward and the body slid along a step or two, graceful and sinuous as a huge serpent. Half his length stood revealed in the moonlight, his black stripes blending so perfectly with the jungle grasses that if I hadn't known he was there I could have looked straight at him and seen nothing but vegetation.

He stood still, turning his head this way and that. Then the silhouette of the machan and the figure huddled on it must have caught his eye, for he stared straight at me. He

held me in that fierce, searching gaze for perhaps 30 seconds, and for that space of time I didn't breathe. I thought my lungs would burst, and I felt the skin prickle back of my neck.

Then he swung his head away and stared at the bones. I lifted the .470 an inch at a time.

It was the same rifle I had with me on my Africa hunts, shooting a 500-grain bullet pushed along by 100 grains of Cordite. For tigers I'd chosen soft-points that deliver a terrible, smashing blow. I knew the gun was adequate for the job, but was I?

The tiger seemed assured at last. He stalked the last two steps to the kill, arrogant and proud, and lowered his head to feed. When I figured I had him in the sights I flashed on the torch. Immediately the tiger threw up his head and stared into the blinding light, and as he did so I found the place I was searching for—high on his shoulder.

The .470 smashed a thunderclap into the night, and the tiger went over in a twisting, rolling ball. He let go one hoarse, terrible roar, and in the light of the torch I saw him bring up a fore-paw and rip at it savagely with his teeth, exactly as I'd seen lions and other big cats do in the pain of a fatal shot. The grass behind him was so thick he could have disappeared in one leap, so I didn't wait for him to die. I lined the sights on the heart area and drove a second shot into him.

The recoil knocked the torch bracket off the rifle, and I heard the light smash on the ground below. The tiger was quiet, never moved, but I slipped fresh shells into the two barrels and waited fully five minutes to make sure. The body neither twitched nor trembled, so I climbed down and walked over to it with the rifle ready. But, with no torch to shoot by, I didn't like the feel of the place even though it was obvious my tiger was dead. There might be others around. I headed for camp.

Native boys carried Stripes to camp next morning. His total length, measured between pegs, was 10½ feet. He was 6 feet 3 inches from tip of nose to base of tail, 43 inches high at the shoulder, and 53 inches in girth behind the shoulders. His neck girth was 33 inches, his head girth two inches more. We figured his weight at over 500 pounds.

My job was done, my mission complete, but bad luck continued to dog Scott, and I worried about it. I needn't have. Scott shot his tiger a couple of nights later—our last night in camp.

As we rode the elephants away from camp next morning on the first leg of the trip out to Tezpur and civilization, I kept looking over the Himalayan hills dotted with countless patches of thick jungle. Tiger country.

I thought then, and have since, that if I ever meet a man who claims he's bored to death, I'll recommend a pitch-black night, a flimsy machan on bamboo stilts, and a tiger on the ground beneath him. If that doesn't jerk life back into him, then nothing will.

THE END