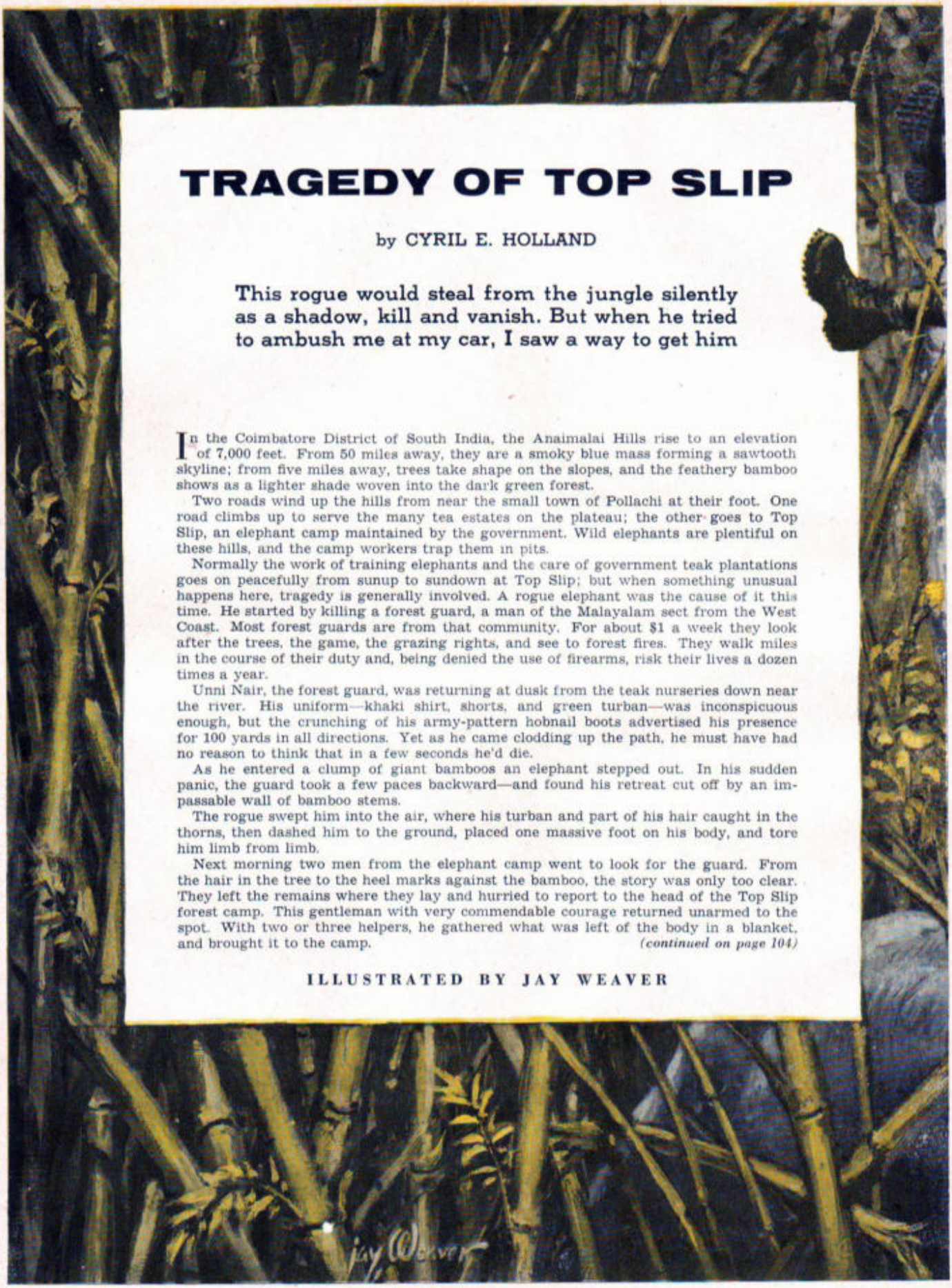

TRAGEDY OF TOP SLIP

by CYRIL E. HOLLAND

This rogue would steal from the jungle silently as a shadow, kill and vanish. But when he tried to ambush me at my car, I saw a way to get him

In the Coimbatore District of South India, the Anaimalai Hills rise to an elevation of 7,000 feet. From 50 miles away, they are a smoky blue mass forming a sawtooth skyline; from five miles away, trees take shape on the slopes, and the feathery bamboo shows as a lighter shade woven into the dark green forest.

Two roads wind up the hills from near the small town of Pollachi at their foot. One road climbs up to serve the many tea estates on the plateau; the other goes to Top Slip, an elephant camp maintained by the government. Wild elephants are plentiful on these hills, and the camp workers trap them in pits.

Normally the work of training elephants and the care of government teak plantations goes on peacefully from sunup to sundown at Top Slip; but when something unusual happens here, tragedy is generally involved. A rogue elephant was the cause of it this time. He started by killing a forest guard, a man of the Malayalam sect from the West Coast. Most forest guards are from that community. For about $1 a week they look after the trees, the game, the grazing rights, and see to forest fires. They walk miles in the course of their duty and, being denied the use of firearms, risk their lives a dozen times a year.

Unni Nair, the forest guard, was returning at dusk from the teak nurseries down near the river. His uniform—khaki shirt, shorts, and green turban—was inconspicuous enough, but the crunching of his army-pattern hobnail boots advertised his presence for 100 yards in all directions. Yet as he came clodding up the path, he must have had no reason to think that in a few seconds he'd die.

As he entered a clump of giant bamboos an elephant stepped out. In his sudden panic, the guard took a few paces backward—and found his retreat cut off by an impassable wall of bamboo stems.

The rogue swept him into the air, where his turban and part of his hair caught in the thorns, then dashed him to the ground, placed one massive foot on his body, and tore him limb from limb.

Next morning two men from the elephant camp went to look for the guard. From the hair in the tree to the heel marks against the bamboo, the story was only too clear. They left the remains where they lay and hurried to report to the head of the Top Slip forest camp. This gentleman with very commendable courage returned unarmed to the spot. With two or three helpers, he gathered what was left of the body in a blanket, and brought it to the camp.

(continued on page 104)

ILLUSTRATED BY JAY WEAVER

Waiting beside the trail, he swept the unfortunate forest guard high into the air, then smashed and tore him to pieces

TRAGEDY OF TOP SLIP

(continued from page 38)

For all the men knew, the elephant was still in the vicinity.

Now, a few years before this incident took place a boyhood friend of mine, Terence O'Neil, had gone up as an assistant engineer to a group of estates on the far side of the Anaimalais from Top Slip. He and I had started our shooting careers together. Many a time, while still in our teens, we heard a bamboo creak while we were hunting. We'd whisper "elephant" and be off as fast as our legs would carry us. Some of that fear of elephants persists in us both to this day.

One day, shortly after the forest guard had been killed, O'Neil crossed from his neck of the wood, where the tea estates were situated, to Top Slip, where the guard had lost his life. He was spending a day deerstalking with his ancient .405, and had come across a small herd of axis deer grazing at the edge of a swamp below him.

O'Neil was waiting, hoping a stag would show, when he whispered some-

thing to his tracker, who should have been standing behind him. Getting no response from the tracker, he repeated the question and then turned his head. Where the tracker's face should have been was the red, open mouth of an elephant.

O'Neil hadn't heard the faintest sound from either the departing tracker or the approaching elephant. It had actually lifted its trunk to grab him before he turned.

Terence sprang over the bushes in front and straight down the hillside, with the elephant after him. Fortunately, it was so steep the elephant was somewhat wary on the descent. O'Neil beat the beast to his motorcycle and got away.

His letter telling me all this went on to say that the forest department had asked the collector—the administrative head of the district—to proscribe (condemn) the elephant. The collector, a man I'd dealt with in undertaking to kill other rogue animals, had suggested that I come up and try for this elephant, O'Neil added. And he concluded his letter by saying he couldn't join me in this venture.

I immediately contacted the forest official concerned and he informed me that the tusker had now been officially proscribed and hoped I'd come up and shoot it. I applied to him at once for a general forest license and got his help in booking the forest bungalow and obtaining a tracker. Then I wrote to some friends in the district capital of Coimbatore requesting them to buy me a very cheap but serviceable car. In a few days I left my home in Madras and took the train for Coimbatore, where I was to pick up the car and proceed about 50 miles to the Anaimalais.

While I was on my way the rogue struck again. The local tribe on Anaimalais are the Kadirs; a wooly-headed, dark-complexioned, happy-go-lucky lot. One morning a roving Kadir took a fancy to a particularly straight bamboo pole, which he started to cut down. He didn't hear the elephant coming up behind him as he worked, but a black trunk suddenly appeared in front of his chest. The next minute he was up in the air. The rogue carried him to a big mango a few yards away and beat his body to pulp.

Terror now set in around the locality, and where you and I were discussing the impending Munich meeting between Chamberlain and Hitler, the people of Top Slip could talk of nothing but the rogue. It was at this stage that I arrived at Mount Stuart bungalow, a short distance from the Top Slip elephant camp.

The bungalow was a comfortable one, except that I first had to dispossess a family of bears that had taken over the place in the years since a human had occupied it. The two trackers assigned me were Kadirs, but I knew nothing of their capabilities.

I'd arrived at Mount Stuart shortly after lunch, and in the early evening I went to the elephant camp at Top Slip to get the latest news of the rogue. I was told he was now near Tekkadi,

another forest establishment back down the road I'd driven to Mount Stuart.

So the next morning I drove in the old car to Tekkadi, and there I saw an astonishing sight. The forester was sitting on the roof of the bungalow, refusing all entreaties to come down. The forester was a young man just out of college. He'd hardly been in the jungle a week, and when two elephants started to fight near the bungalow just before I arrived, he'd taken refuge on the roof.

After a little gentle talking, I got him down from his perch. He thought—as did the local Kadirs—that one of the fighting elephants was the rogue. I asked about the fight, and he said that after 20 minutes or so one elephant had run away.

All this had happened a couple of hours previously, so my trackers and I got onto the spoor at once.

But the tracks we followed, those of the elephant that had run away, finally led into a herd of a dozen elephants. It was unlikely that the rogue had joined a herd; a rogue is usually ousted by the herd leader. Anyhow, we decided to watch the herd awhile.

There's no more pleasant or exciting study in the jungle. Contrary to popular belief, the herd is not led by an old bull, but invariably by a cow. The tuskers follow after the herd in a leisurely manner, and if the herd takes fright these bulls get away fast, leaving the mothers with calves to bring up the rear. There's a reason for this female leadership—the herd mustn't move too fast for the calves to feed.

Elephants communicate with one another and express feelings by uttering a great variety of sounds with the trunk or throat. An angry elephant will trumpet shrilly. One brooding over his wounds will grumble constantly. And sometimes—through fear or impatience—elephants produce a roar that can be heard for miles. They also make a peculiar warning sound, as when a tiger is near, by tapping the end of the trunk on the ground and at the same time blowing little gusts of air through it. This sound has a hollow and strangely metallic quality.

Right now I was watching a little calf nursing when his mother suddenly sensed danger. She had carried this little fellow for about 22 months and was not going to let harm come to him now. Knowing that there's no more dangerous or persistent beast than a cow elephant with a calf, the Kadirs and I beat a quiet but hasty retreat.

We returned to Tekkadi and investigated the other set of tracks. As they seemed to follow the road, I decided to take the car, piling the two Kadirs and another local man in the back.

We tracked the elephant down the road for three or four miles, to where the construction of this new road ended. Here we faced the car about and walked on into the forest. But all we saw were some bison and sambar deer, and as dusk closed in we turned back to regain the car.

We'd stayed a bit too late, but I'd had the forethought to bring an electric

torch, and I was just getting ready to use it as we approached the car. Just then we heard a most unusual sound. I switched on the flashlight and there, 40 or 50 yards away, was an elephant at the car. He had his trunk under the running board and was lifting and dropping the vehicle, at the same time uttering little squeaks. The sound we'd heard was the thump as the car fell back onto its tires.

My first thought was not of danger with the rogue, but of the car turning turtle so that I'd have to walk miles to find some other transportation. I grabbed the 12 gauge shotgun—loaded with slugs—from one of the Kadirs and fired into the road near the elephant's feet. He backed away from the car and shook his head. Before he had time to think, I fired the second barrel. The beast turned and ran down the road for 100 yards.

I rushed to the car and switched on the lights. There he was standing on the road, trying to make up his mind. If I'd been sure at that moment that he was the rogue, I think I could have shot him that night, for my heavy .404 Mauser rifle has a light-reflecting platinum sight, and I might have got up close enough to put a 400-grain bullet between his eyes.

But I wasn't positive he was the rogue. As he stood there I started the engine, blew the horn, and drove straight at him. He stuck it out until I was perhaps 30 yards away and thinking of stamping on the brakes to leap out of the car. Then he stepped into the heavy forest—and my trackers and I got out of there and drove back to Mount Stuart.

I was now convinced that this elephant was the rogue, so next morning I returned to Tekkadi. We picked up the tracks and I measured a clear print with my pocket tape. The diameter was 17 inches, so this made the elephant eight feet 11 inches at the shoulder—twice the circumference of an elephant's forefoot is its height at the shoulder. We followed the tracks for a few miles and then lost them on hard ground. Finally, just before noon, we gave up and turned back for Mount Stuart.

Before having lunch and a lie-down that afternoon I went into the jungle near the bungalow to see the grave of a fine and popular forest officer, Hugo Wood, who had recently died and had expressed a wish to be buried in his beloved jungle. It was a touching sight to see this lonely new tombstone in the deep peace of the forest he had tended so carefully.

Later—I don't know just when—I was standing in an aisle of bamboos, and the rogue elephant, with a puckish smile on his face, was nodding at me. I was trying to put two cartridges into the breech of my double-barreled 12 gauge, but each time I did they slipped right through and fell out the other side. Next the rogue smiled again and said, "Come closer, I don't want to catch you." When I refused to believe him he put out his trunk and caught me round the leg with a jerk. I believe

I screamed; I know I spluttered and choked. Then I opened my eyes.

I'd fallen asleep and one of the Kadir trackers was shaking my leg. He was greatly agitated and told me to come quickly.

Outside stood a little knot of people who'd come to tell me that the rogue had just made a triple killing. A few hours earlier, and just after I'd driven up the road from Tekkadi, an old Kadir man, his young daughter, and her child had been coming along the road from one of their hamlets toward Top Slip. As is common in India, the man was walking 20 yards ahead of the girl, who was carrying her year-old child. As the man came around a blind corner the elephant stepped out, caught the old man, and dashed him to pieces on the road. The girl, still carrying her child, turned and fled.

The elephant worked 10 minutes on the man, but he hadn't forgotten the mother and child, and he went down the road after them. In less than a mile he caught them. To think of the horror that girl must have gone through is in itself a horror.

That evening, with one tracker (the other had refused to come), I scouted the hillside and the valley below the road where the three had been killed. We tracked until dark—and then we got lost.

Eventually we found ourselves in a swamp in pitch dark. Every step took us down almost to the waist, and I had to hang onto the tracker to tell where he was. Mosquitoes swarmed over us.

We were looking for a patch of dry ground on which to spend the night when, faintly in the distance, we heard the river and got our bearings. We were out of the swamp and headed for the river when we heard the *tonk, tonk* of a tame elephant's bell. I felt relieved but soon discovered my guide wasn't; he explained that these tame elephants were let out to feed at night and were —during the hours of darkness—as dangerous as the wild ones. We skirted the tame elephant and finally hit the road that led us back to the car. I flopped into the driver's seat while the tracker got in the back.

I was just reaching for a flask of tea when there was a scream and an elephant rushed down the road from behind us. There was no sound of a bell this time. I flipped the switch, jabbed the starter, and we shot forward just ahead of the elephant. It was a terrifying ending to a harrowing day, and I slept badly that night.

Next morning we returned to the spot where I'd left the car the night before. From the sign, it became apparent the elephant had located the car and waited in ambush. He'd evidently come to associate the vehicle with human beings. That gave me an idea. It was a slim chance, but the more I thought about it the better it seemed.

Around 5 o'clock that afternoon I came back to the spot with the Kadir tracker. We turned the car where I'd turned it the evening before, and I raced the engine and blew the horn. Somewhere down in the valley near the

river was the elephant, and he could hear such sounds three miles away.

We left the car and climbed the bank beside the road. Behind us the hill rose steeply, too steep even for an elephant. We were perhaps 20 yards from the car and above it. Here I decided to sit until late dusk.

I didn't have to wait that long. Within 20 minutes I saw a huge shadow come around the corner—followed by the elephant.

It has always amazed me how silently an elephant can tread when he doesn't want to be heard. This rogue had come pussyfooting up through dense bamboo and undergrowth like a ghost, and I had no idea he was in the vicinity until I saw his shadow.

I slowly raised my .404, which I'd loaded with five 400-grain solids. He was bobbing his head and I couldn't get a bead on a vital spot. Upon reaching the car he ran his trunk along the edge of the folded-back canvas top. Then he put his trunk inside the car for a few seconds and felt around. Finally he walked to the other side. I saw his ear and fired.

The rogue let out a scream and went back along the road. I jumped down the bank and cautiously peered around the corner, to see him pivoting around like a top. Then he went down the bank with blood running down the side of his head and staining his tusks and his great trunk.

He slipped and slid unsteadily for 40 or 50 yards while I tried to get in another shot, then he swung around and faced me. I was above him, so I fired high between his eyes. For a moment he swayed, and then with a shudder his back legs gave way and he toppled over. I went in close and fired another round into his brain near the temple, but it wasn't necessary.

I jumped on top of the carcass, which was five feet high as he lay on his side, and from there I could see the head and shoulders of the Kadir, who had so bravely followed me unarmed all through the hunt. He came running down to greet me and was beaming with delight.

I examined the elephant, trying to discover what had turned him rogue. His tusks—of medium size—seemed in order. The left one was broken off at the tip, but not so short as to have caused him any pain. He had no visible wounds. But I could perceive an oily secretion exuding from a tiny hole on the side of his head, and I concluded he was going into must—a periodic condition probably associated with the rut, when this secretion is noticeable. Possibly he'd become quarrelsome, two or three bulls had driven him from the herd, and he'd gone off to sulk. Then killing the unfortunate forest guard had whetted his appetite, and he'd gone around hunting for trouble and not stopping until he found it.

He was old, as I could see from his loose skin, bony head, and torn and folded-over ears—probably 50 years old when the first World War broke out; twice as old even then as I was the day I ended his reign of terror. THE END