The UNDEAD

by TED SHATTO

ILLUSTRATED by J. C. WOODS

Tigers may be shot the easy way. All you have to do is to be clever enough, or have enough good hired help, to get one to expose himself when you're ready to shoot. Unlike lions, which often will stand in short grass in broad daylight and watch you approach, tigers usually lie in heavy cover during the day and come out only at night. Most tigers are shot the easy way.

Going after the jungle lord the hard way means meeting him on foot and on his terms. There are three ways of doing it. If you're a superhunter you may be able to locate and stalk your tiger. Or you may run into him when you're hunting something else. Or you may find yourself in a situation similar to the one I was during my 1951 hunt.

Picture me in a low tree as darkness began to settle over the Indian jungle. My machan was securely snugged, and the branches were arranged to permit maximum shootability from maximum concealment. You can't take chances with a tiger's incredible vision. He can detect starlight reflected from a moving gun barrel 90° to the side.

My big double-barreled .450/400 Westley Richards rifle, safety off, rested comfortably across my lap. I was in my sleeping bag, nude from the waist down to preclude any chance of having a tight garment bind me. It might take only a wriggle on my part, I knew, to alarm a near-by tiger.

I puffed my pipe as I watched the live buffalo bait nuzzle his hay. From time to time he gazed down the cart road to my right, and I wondered whether he was regretting the departure of the humans who had tied him there or was anticipating the coming of a tiger.

I'd been told there was little danger that the tobacco smoke would give me away, since the tiger's sense of smell probably would be no better than mine. But this had to be my last pipe, for the flare of a match could easily ruin the careful tracking and planning that had been done in preparation for this night.

My thoughts wandered back to my family in Kabul, Afghanistan, where I was employed by the Afghan Government as a professor of geography. There had been a lot of geography, I thought, in my trek through the Khyber Pass to Peshawar in Pakistan. And a lot more of it in my travels through Lahore and into India at New Delhi, finally to stop at the remote village of Kashipur near the soaring foothills of the Himalaya range.

But I hadn't come to study the geography, and I gave thanks for the thousandth time to my good friend

Mukerji sits atop Ranee behind Mohammed Shah, the mahout. At right is Umrao Singh, the tracker; left, Mukerji's gunbearer

A. D. Mukerji who had invited me to hunt what I consider to be the most dangerous of all big-game animals—the Bengal tiger.

Mukerji, a tall, powerful Brahmin of the highest caste, has charge of a vast government project to clear land for crop growing. He's also the best hunter I've ever known. As a youth he won the all-India trapshooting championship at Calcutta in competition with many of the British Empire's best wingshots. Since wild animals and agricultural projects don't mix well—especially tigers and cattle—it is part of A.D.'s job to eradicate such game as refuses to migrate. And he gets paid for it!

The barking call of a hog deer brought my mind back to the work at hand. The call set off a series of similar barks, and I sat back and listened, for the querulous calls of the deer showed they suspected danger. Their calls were followed by a whole series of emphatic alarms which indicated the presence of a big cat. That could only mean a tiger, according to Mukerji, who claims that the larger felines have chased almost all the leopards out of this area.

Not far distant a swamp deer sounded three sharp alarms. Almost immediately came the deep, vibrating roar of an angry tiger. The deer barked again and the tiger replied. His resonant bass set up a quiver in the pit of my stomach. The awesome duet continued for minutes, and its end left me in a cold sweat, unable even to wriggle a toe. Though I occupied my mind with a picture of the discovered stalk and a disturbed deer belling a disgruntled tiger, I couldn't evade the realization that just the voice of the tiger half a mile or so away had petrified me.

The evening wore on without further incident, and I settled back in my sleeping bag. Mukerji had briefed me carefully, and I knew that no tigers were likely to come between 10 and 3 o'clock. I began to nod.

The sharp bark of a swamp stag jerked me awake. It was repeated, and I figured it came from a spot not more than 100 yards down the cart road. I lifted myself noiselessly to a sitting position and pushed my right thumb against the safety catch of the .450, though I knew it was already off and ready. I raised the big double slowly until it covered the buffalo calf, and my elbows slipped into a steady rest on my knees.

The waning moon cast patchy patterns on the forest floor, and I saw my calf backed to the limit of the tie rope. It was two hours before dawn. Seconds passed. The buffalo made a futile tug at his rope, then was still. I must have been breathing, though I had no awareness of it, but certainly I made no other movement. For me the whole world was focused into a tableau of terrible expectancy.

A movement on the road became the tiger. His massive head held low and his tail out straight behind, he flowed along swiftly and silently without any apparent motion of his legs. I didn't know then that he stood three and a half feet at the shoulder, but he was much bigger than anything I'd expected. My machan somehow seemed much lower.

The silence of the tiger's smooth glide was broken by heavy footfalls as he rushed upon the doomed buffalo. He seized the calf and dragged it down, at the same time letting out a gurgling snarl that froze my blood. Mukerji had told me to hold my fire until the tiger was occupied with feeding, but my nerves couldn't stand much more of this. I aligned the barrels of the Westley Richards against the brute's spine and strained to see where the sights should be. I remembered to snug my cheek well down against the comb to prevent overshooting, and then I touched off the right barrel.

The flash of the shot revealed the monster's black stripes and orange coat. The noise of the 400-grain bullet smacking home was sweet music. The tiger didn't move, nor did I. Mukerji's often-repeated admonition, "When he's lying there, give him the other barrel," kept running through my mind. But over and above it was my own ego singing away that I'd shot once and the

beast was mine. Somewhere deep inside another voice told me to let well enough alone, that if I shot again I might make the tiger mad.

I heard a noise of paws moving. The tiger was recovering from the two tons of shocking power that had pinned him to the earth. Now I knew the argument was settled, that I must use my left barrel while there was time. Yet I did nothing.

Then with a choking roar the tiger leaped to his feet and charged away, bouncing off a tree as he went. I suddenly was able to move and to sight the .450 on his flight. But there was no response to my tightening finger. I realized too late that I was still pulling the right-barrel trigger. The tiger was swallowed by the night.

Lamentation could do no good, but I found some satisfaction in cursing myself out. The tiger had rested there, still and helpless, and I'd sat in the tree, just as still and helpless. Why? Why had I done nothing?

I opened my rifle to replace the spent cartridge case and was startled by the ping of the ejector as it threw the case past my ear and over my shoulder. It fell noisily through the branches and to the ground. That should attract half the tigers in India, I said to myself, but it didn't. My tightened nerves relaxed as I inserted a fresh four-inch cartridge and closed the gun. I felt so much better after a bit that I lighted a pipe and thought of what would have to be done as soon as daylight permitted. Thank God for Mukerji, I told myself. He'd be on hand to supervise the operations. Perhaps we'd find the tiger dead. Fine. But maybe the cat had run to some well-covered retreat and was holed up licking his wounds. If so it would be up to me to find and finish him. I recalled the immortal words of Hemingway's hero when faced with a similar problem: "Can't we just forget about it?"

Daylight found me still relaxed and philosophical. It also brought Mukerji's chief tracker — Umrao Singh — and a helper. They trudged cheerfully and noisily down the cart road, commenting on the fresh pug marks ahead of them. I sang out in what I thought was passable Hindustani to beware, that the tiger was not dead and might be near by.

"Yea, sahib," answered the worthy Umrao, "the tiger is undead and is near by. We take care."

I took care too and watched the forest cover carefully as I dressed and handed things down to the men below. Last of all I gave Umrao the big Westley Richards and then swung over the side of the machan and to the ground. It took three or four awkward stamps to regain the use of my legs. I turned to a grinning Umrao, who handed me the rifle and the two cartridges he had extracted from it. His look said plainly that a sahib doesn't hand a tracker a loaded gun.

I hastily reloaded the rifle, and we beat a retreat down the road toward our rendezvous with Mukerji. We found him waiting in his car at the main road. He listened in silence while I blurted out my account of the night's events, and when I stopped he said nothing. But he began to fill his pockets with rifled slugs for his shotgun. He didn't speak until he'd loaded two into the barrels. Then he said, "Maybe he's dead and maybe he isn't. We'll have to go and see."

Mukerji's unusual reluctance to speak puzzled me. I wasn't sure whether to be ashamed because I hadn't killed the tiger outright or proud that I'd hit him at all. We made our way back to the scene of the shooting. Here Umrao Singh took over, and his wonderful tracker's eyes re-created the evening's events.

There were great long gashes in the soft earth where the tiger's claws had left their marks as he sprang blindly away. The absence of a bullet mark in the ground indicated that the beast was carrying 400 grains of lead somewhere inside him. Umrao pointed to where the tiger had run crazily into a tree, leaving torn bark and bits of hair, before making off into the elephant grass. There was blood everywhere. Not bright, frothy blood of a lung shot, nor darker fluid with bits of food in it that one might expect from a gut shot. Just blood. And there wasn't enough of it in any one place to give us much hope that the tiger was seriously hurt.

Fifty slow and nervous yards away we found where the tiger had collided with another tree and practically knocked himself out. There was evidence that he'd rested there for some

Villagers gather round to see the awesome jungle lord and the big .450/400 Westley Richards rifle that had brought him down

time. Then we came to that which I had dreaded. After his rest, and apparently in full possession of his senses again, the tiger had walked from this place and, with only a little more bleeding, had made directly for the river a quarter of a mile away. At the river we lost his trail at the edge of a great patch of 20-foot elephant grass that could have hidden 1,000 tigers.

Mukerji shook his head. "This is a job for an elephant," he said. "It will take several hours to get one here, so let's go home for breakfast. Your tiger will lie up here to lick his wounds and, after lunch, we'll come find him." He added, as an afterthought, "Dead, I hope." I hoped so too, but even I knew better than to expect that.

Early that afternoon the four of us were atop Ranee, a stolid but well-trained lady elephant that has hunted tigers for more years than I've lived. Her right eye is gone, lost in some forgotten charge of a jungle monarch. Ranee knows her business, and so does the astute Mohammed Shah, her mahout, who sat astride her neck and carried his elephant hook proudly as a badge of his caste. Mukerji hung his legs over the left side of the hunting platform and I dangled mine from the right. Behind us knelt Umrao Singh, his keen brown eyes searching unceasingly for some sign of our quarry.

Two hours elapsed before Umrao's hawklike eyes spotted a telltale mark. It was a single drop of fresh blood 42 inches up on a single stalk of grass in that vast grass jungle. Now we knew within an acre where the tiger was, and Mukerji's genius for strategy came to the fore.

He touched Mohammed Shah's shoulder and pointed. The mahout prodded our huge mount on the side of the head, and we turned and forced our way into the densest part of the grass. Ranee was reluctant to hold a course in the direction Mukerji wanted to go. I didn't blame her much because even I couldn't see the ground through the towering grass. I began to wonder what would have to be done if we didn't come up with the tiger.

My wondering ended abruptly. With a short, coughing roar that almost paralyzed my nerves, the tiger attacked. He smashed his great bulk against Ranee's solid side, and our forward motion ended. We swung our guns ahead and tried vainly for a good look at our rash assailant. But we soon were forced to forget about shooting, and hold on for dear life instead, as Ranee went into action. Screaming her battle cry, she became an earthquake as she stamped her forefeet rapidly and tried to pin down the snarling beast that was slashing at her.

The engagement broke off as suddenly as it had started. There was a crashing noise as the big cat retreated and Ranee plowed through the grass in pursuit. Mohammed Shah beat her head with his hook until the fire of her rage died down and she became controllable. Perhaps 200 yards from the scene of conflict we emerged into a cleared field and, safely away from that awful grass, descended to take stock of damage.

There were many bloody gashes on Ranee's throat, and there was a huge tear on her right leg just a few feet below where my shoes had dangled. She followed her mahout to the near-by river where he found mud to poultice her hurts.

Meanwhile Mukerji and Umrao Singh held council in such rapid Hindustani that I couldn't catch one word. Then Mukerji turned to me. "Never from all I've seen, heard, and read about tigers have I known of one going straight at an elephant and trying for the throat. It's suicide. This tiger must be tremendously big or crazed with pain. Maybe both."

"Maybe both," I agreed, "but it wasn't suicide in this case. I'm just as glad he did go for the elephant. Suppose he'd jumped on her back?"

Mukerji whistled softly and shook his head. "This is a bad situation," he said. "If the tiger weren't wounded it would be easy. But we know now that we can't drive him with the elephant. We can't drive him with beaters either, for the same reason. Sending men into that grass jungle would be the equivalent of the death sentence."

He paused, and then he went on.

I know how you feel about sportsmanship. We agree about giving game a square chance. But this is a wounded tiger. If we don't bag him this afternoon he'll doubtless get away. And if he gets away and lives it's five to one he will become a maneater. I cannot let that happen."

Mukerji plucked a small stalk of grass and chewed on it, much as might an American farm boy. For once in my life I practiced the virtue of not saying anything.

There was only one sure way of getting that tiger, and I knew what it was. Mukerji would take the big rifle out of my hands and, while I sat back and watched, would crawl into that grass jungle. Somehow I couldn't quite

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stomach the thought. After an interval of silence Mukerji spoke again.

"The tiger is in a patch of grass about 200 yards square," he said. "The river bounds it on the north and west, and the wind is blowing strongly from the south, where we are. We'll leave you here in a good spot where you can command the river to the west, and we'll work around to the east and north. As we go we'll fire the grass. If the blaze drives the tiger out, one of us will get a shot at him as he crosses the river. If not——" He shrugged his shoulders. Then he went on. "If not, there will at least be a lot less grass."

At Umrao Singh's whistle Mohammed Shah and Ranee returned from the river. Mukerji mounted. We exchanged salutes as they moved off. Umrao followed closely on foot and set fire to the grass every few yards. I took a position where I could command my stretch of the river.

The high, dry grass made a roaring line of flame, and I couldn't keep from thrilling at the sight of it. Nor could I help considering the feelings of the tiger, aware of this new menace and probably knowing that it was a further means of torture devised by the same men who had brought him to his present straits.

The flames burned themselves out in half an hour, but for a few isolated patches of persistent crackling. Nothing had crossed the river on my side, and the absence of any shot from Mukerji told me that the tiger was still somewhere in front of me. Along the edge of the river was a belt of green reeds which had resisted the fire, and I suspected that the tiger would be there.

I thought how easy it would be to wait, to just stand where I was and watch the river. By and by Mukerji and the others would come. Mukerji would get down from Ranee's back and say, "Well, old boy, I guess it's my show now. Give me the rifle, please." Yes, it would be easy, and frankly I had no intention of having it happen any other way. After all, Mukerji was an old hand with tigers.

But there resides in each of us some strange force which on occasion supersedes reason. That force took possession of me at that moment, and I was a little startled to find myself walking forward. I broke open the Westley Richards and examined my two cartridges carefully. Then I replaced them, closed the action, and shoved the safety forward. The grass fire had left a fine, powdery ash on the earth which cushioned my footfalls. I moved almost noiselessly. I was relaxed and felt no fear, though I couldn't be sure whether it was I who was approaching the wounded tiger or whether I was watching someone else do it.

I tried to stay about 10 yards from the edge of the green reeds. This seemed close enough to make the tiger charge and still provide room for me to swing my gun when necessary. There was no doubt in my mind that the tiger would charge. I'd been giving him trouble all day and he'd welcome a chance to settle the score.

Nearing the area where I thought the tiger should be, I stopped to listen and to scan the grass. From behind me I heard shouts, and I smiled at the thought of Mukerji's solicitude. But I knew the issue would be ended before Mukerji could catch up with me and take part in it. I moved a few more steps forward, hoping that the tiger would make the first mistake.

He did. I heard a low hiss in the reeds. Instantly I swung my gun in its direction, and as I did so the tiger charged with an explosive, coughing roar. I was aware of a huge round head, gaping jaws, long white teeth, and eyes blazing with awful fury. I don't know whether the tiger came on me with a glide, bound, or spring. All I know is that the terrible head kept getting larger and larger until it seemed to fill my field of view.

The Westley Richards recoiled against my shoulder, and the tiger stopped in mid-air. The head no longer increased in size, but I was conscious of two mighty forepaws swinging wide, their unsheathed talons reaching out. I felt the ground shake as the tiger fell in a motionless heap in front of me. Slowly I raised the gun again and my finger found the left-barrel trigger, but I lowered the weapon without firing. I'd shot the beast over the left eye, and the bullet through his brain had brought instant death.

Mukerji was even more jubilant than I when we measured the tiger. My steel tape recorded his pegged length at 10 feet 3 inches. And also the fact that his nose came to rest closer to where I stood than it was to the end of his tail. From all I can gather, very few tigers have been reported in all India's history that were bigger than mine—probably not more than a dozen, maybe even fewer. That was gratifying, but far more so to me was the realization that I'd killed a tiger the hard way.

THE END