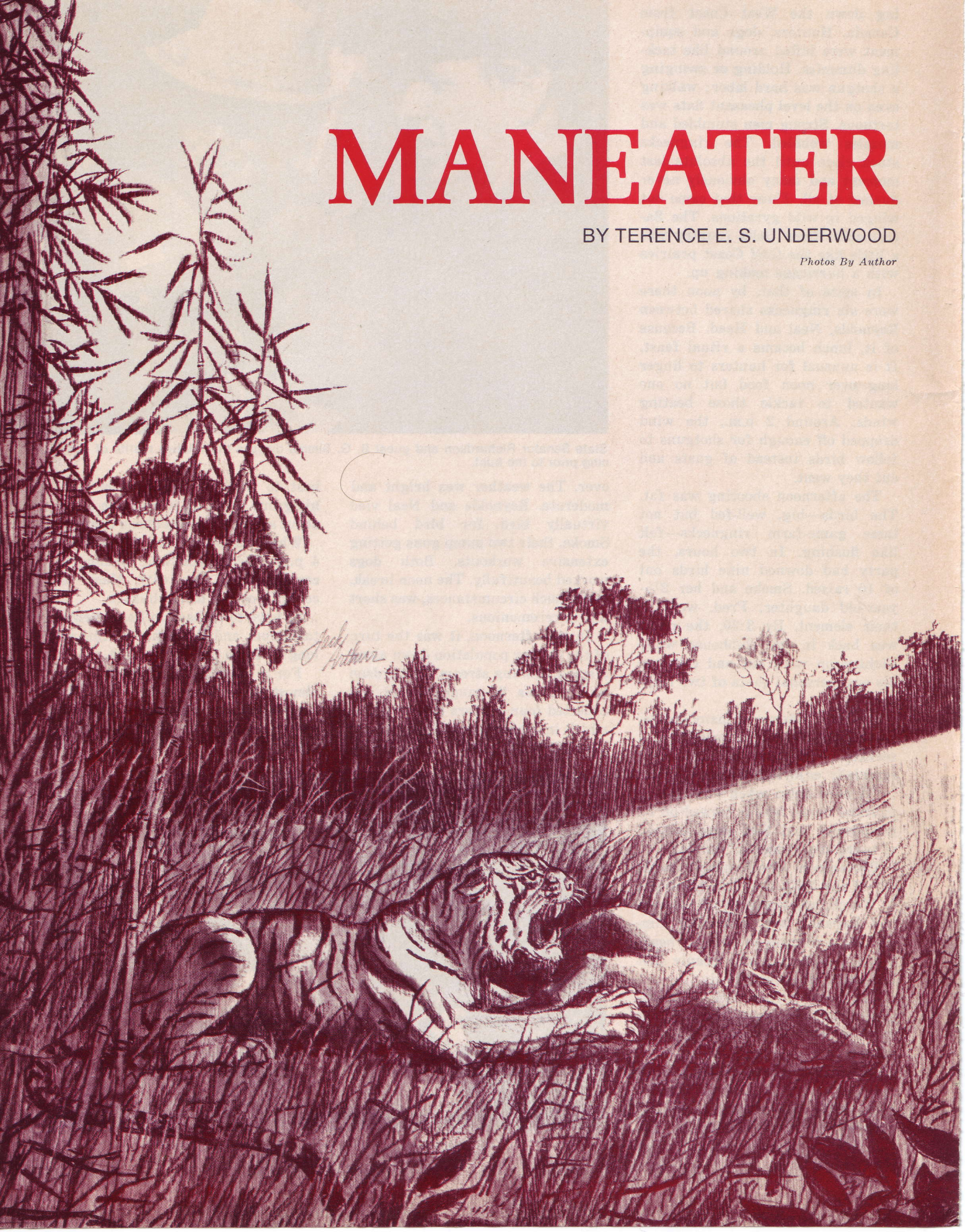


# MANEATER

BY TERENCE E. S. UNDERWOOD

*Photos By Author*



A tiger spends most of his day resting in dense jungle which provides water and plenty of cool shade. He leaves his hideout at dusk well refreshed, his muscles rippling as he moves like a shadow through the jungle.

His domain is large, the home of many birds and animals. His menu consists of sambhar, chital, pig, swamp deer and domestic cattle—the larger animals. He will also hunt with infinite patience for crabs, frogs and turtles along the reed-covered banks of a stream.

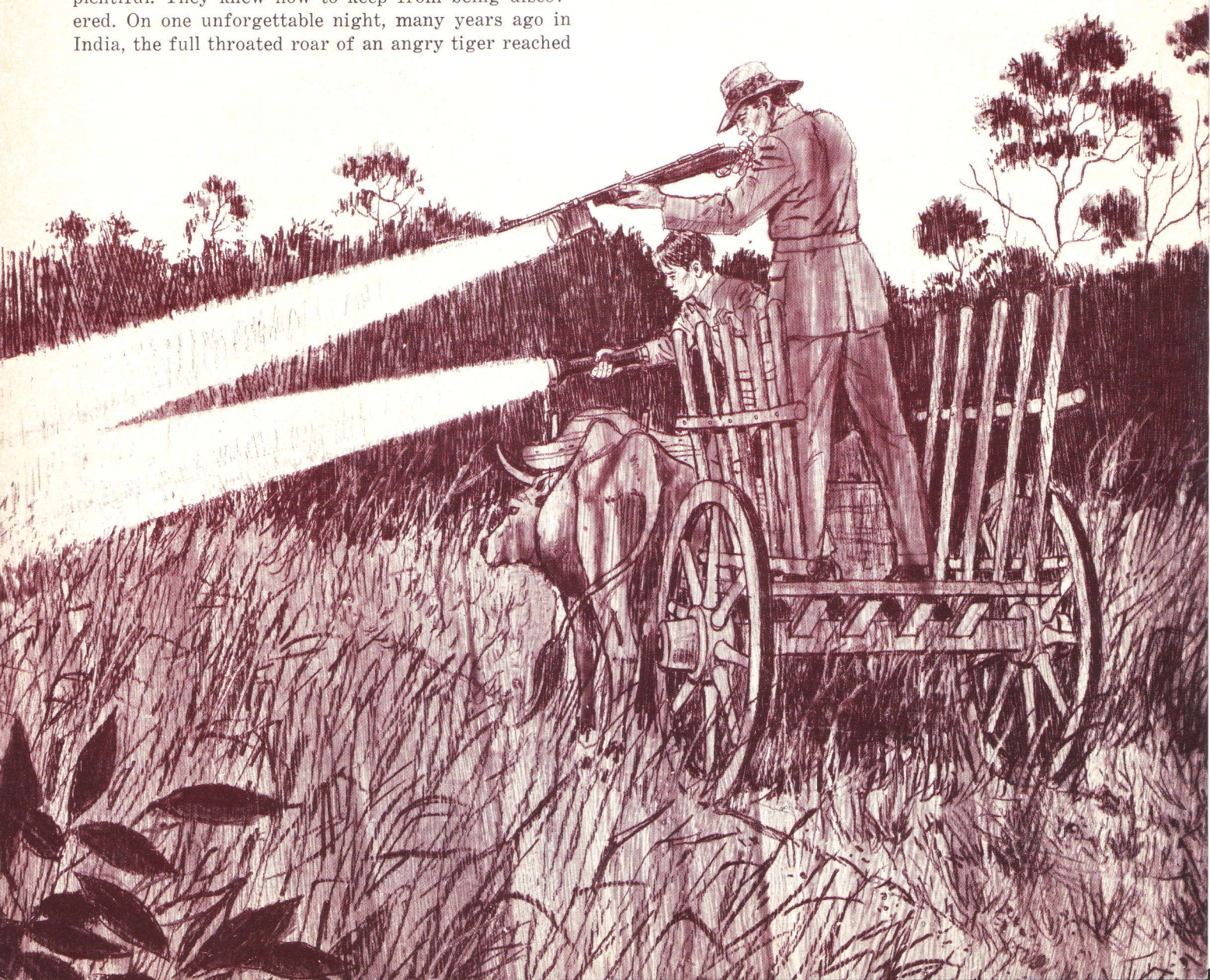
All animals fear the tiger, even the elephant. A glimpse of a tiger, or a current of air with his scent on it, often sets off a chain reaction of alarm calls. The tiger isn't bothered by these calls provided his belly is full. At such times, his actions sometimes suggest that he enjoys the recognition. He may forsake the shadows to stride boldly down the middle of a road, or nonchalantly wend his way through open forest, perhaps within sight of a village. Should he be discovered and the alarm sounded when he is hunting for a meal, he will reveal his displeasure with a series of loud, blood-curling roars that shake the jungle.

One seldom heard this sound even when tigers were plentiful. They knew how to keep from being discovered. On one unforgettable night, many years ago in India, the full throated roar of an angry tiger reached

our ears. I was a boy of sixteen then, and my father, a strapping six-footer, worked for the Government of India.

We lived in a town called Khandwa, headquarters of the Nimar Forest Division, Central Provinces of India. Dad was a keen big game hunter whose preference for tracking down large cattle-lifters (tigers that ate cattle) was well-known and widely appreciated. In our area, tiger and leopard were listed as "unlimited", meaning numbers that could be shot under license, but Dad, who had shot many tigers, limited his activities to the largest and heaviest cattle-lifters. A tiger's pugmark gives a close indication of the animal's size, and, of course, its sex.

Villagers living in the jungle within a 40-mile radius of Khandwa—a great distance in those days—regularly brought us news of the big cats. We were told where they were traveling, what kills had been made. The villagers' visits usually coincided with bazaar day



which fell on a Sunday. Their bullock carts became a common sight parked under the large neem tree in front of our bungalow. In this way, the station master of Ajanti got word to us that a man had been killed by a tiger at a village about 18 miles from our house. This was in December, 1940.

Man-eating tigers were rare in our area, thanks to the limits imposed on the taking of horned and antlered game. Our big cats had plenty of their natural food. Those of us who hunted tiger and leopard and were careless enough to wound one were expected to finish the job. In spite of these regulations, which were strictly enforced, a man-eater sometimes made the rounds.

On a summer's night in the year 1938, a Ghond tribesman named Bhoora took his muzzle-loader from its hiding place under a log with the intention of poaching sambhar at a waterhole close to the Government reserves. When he failed to return home the following day, his wife became frightened and asked the headman of the village to help. He soon got a party together.

It was the time of year when the sweet yellow fruit of the mowha, a large shade tree that grows throughout the jungle, ripens and falls to the ground, where it quickly ferments. The Indian sloth bear, a thoroughly ugly and unpredictable creature, is exceedingly fond of this wild fruit which is also sought after by the villagers who use it to brew a very potent liquor. It was thus feared that Bhoora, who counted moonshining among his talents, had found himself at odds with such a bear.

On starting their search at the waterhole, the party found blood, and the pug-marks of a tiger. Bhoora's muzzle-loader, cocked and primed, lay in the bottom of the dugout which was cunningly hidden against the bank. There'd been no cause to suspect the presence of a man-eater, and one can only assume that Bhoora had fallen asleep before the attack.

The headman picked up the muzzle-loader and followed the drag which led to the edge of the jungle. The tiger had stopped there to eat Bhoora. Swarms of big yellow hornets and blue-bottle flies buzzed up from the grass as the group approached. They quickly collected the scraps that were left and hurried back to the village. In due course they told their story to the station master, who notified district headquarters.

A week after Bhoora was killed, Floyd Gidney, permanent way inspector at Kandwa, was returning home on his trolley along the Khandwa-Burhanpur line. It was an overcast night and the air smelled of rain. Suddenly one of the trolley men screamed as he was pulled backward into some bushes growing along the bank of the railway line.

Floyd, a sturdy athletic man who always carried a shotgun on the trolley, immediately set the brake. The trolley was stopped at the tip of a slope. Floyd did not know what had attacked his trolleyman as up to that time Bhoora's death had not been given wide circulation, but fearing the worst he quickly got out his shotgun, loaded it with buckshot, and ran back along the

line where his trolleyman was screaming that he was being killed.

When Floyd drew level with the bushes out of which the screams arose, the killer identified itself with a series of loud roars and came rushing up to the bank. Floyd could not see the tiger in the dark, but cut loose with both barrels in the direction of the sound. Then he turned and ran back to the trolley, intending to grab another load of buckshot. When he jumped on, however, the second trolleyman slipped the brake and down they sped toward the distant lights of Khandwa.

That same night Floyd, with two trolleyloads of his workmen armed with hatchets, crowbars and lanterns returned to the scene of the tragedy. There was a chance that Floyd had driven off the tiger, in which case the wounded man might yet be saved. But, handicapped by the dark, they found trace of neither trolleyman nor tiger.

Next morning early, they all went back. Now they found where the tiger had caught the trolleyman as he labored behind the trolley. He'd been pulled a short distance along the track, then over the bank, where the poor man still lay, dead from the mauling he'd received but otherwise untouched. Floyd's shots must have come close for they had driven the tiger out of the area.

Now word of the man-eater spread rapidly. In the next two years, the tiger filled the hearts of many humble villagers with terror, and some not so humble district officers who pressed on with their duties throughout the man-eater's area, often living in tents while so engaged would admit concern. Many notable efforts were made to kill the man-eater, none more hair-raising than one that came about by accident.

District Superintendent of Police Rex Hall, an avid fisherman but only an occasional hunter, was on tour when he drove into Kirgoan village. Dasarath, the headman, came out of his hut when he heard the car approaching from the direction of the river. He saluted as Rex stepped out of the car, fly rod in hand, and handed Rex's servant a small brass jug of milk for the official's tea. Then he turned to Rex and told him that the herdsman of the village had observed a tiger walking along the bank of the river that very evening, while the cattle were being watered, and he begged Rex to abandon his plans to go fishing. He further advised the sahib to exercise great caution in anything he did, saluted once more and returned to his hut, locking the door behind him.

While on tour, Rex wore a .455 Webley revolver in the holster of his Sam Browne belt, and with this powerful though cumbersome handgun he was an excellent shot, sometimes potting sparrows out of trees to prove a point to wicked people living in his district. So, very typically, he paid little or no attention to Dasarath's friendly warning, but he did give up the idea of going fishing.

Rex got back in his car and drove off. It was only a short distance to the rest house sitting on a hill beyond a grove of orange trees. Upon arrival, Rex unlocked the door of the rest house, and his towering Mohammedan



Mr. Underwood's father and the maneater of Ajanti he killed with one shot between the eyes.

servant, named Abdul Hanif, checked the oil lamps, wound up the wicks and touched a lighted match to them. In no time at all, Rex was sitting comfortably in a long-arm easy chair, a lighted cigar in one hand and a glass of brandy in the other, first having opened a window to let in a current of cool evening air.

Soon it was dark and a number of beetles and moths found their way into the room, attracted there by the glow of the oil lamp reposing in the center of the teak-wood table. All traces of stale air had vanished, leaving the room sweet and cool, and as Rex leaned back in his chair, a slight movement high on the opposite wall caught his eye. As he watched, a small lizard began to stalk a moth that had settled on the wall, and Rex became engrossed in the outcome.

Just as the lizard was about to make its final dash across the wall, Abdul Hanif came striding through the door, holding a tray of food in one hand and the milk jug in the other. Rex shifted his gaze, and saw a look of terror sweep across his servant's face. Abdul recovered quickly, and with a curse he flung the milk jug past Rex. A loud roar filled the room, and as Rex whirled in his chair he saw the tiger coming through the window. He grabbed his Webley off the table, where he'd placed it after taking off his belt, and triggered two fast shots at the tiger, which crashed into the table before escaping through the door. The lamp hit the stone floor and burst into flames, adding greatly to all the confusion, but again the servant, calling on his training as a soldier, grabbed a mattress off the bed and stifled the flames.

Dasarat and his brother-in-law joined the police officer next day, when they found blood leading from the steps of the rest house to the orange grove across the road. From there, the tiger had made its way into a strip of dense jungle between the river bank and the orange grove. At this point, it was decided that the tiger should be left alone until reinforcements could be

found, suitably armed for what had to be done.

Rex drove back to district headquarters in Khandwa and went directly to the D.F.O.'s office. The D.F.O. himself was on tour, but Assistant Commissioner Claudius, though crippled in one leg, very sportingly offered to help Rex after they'd picked up a couple of rifles. They drove back to Kirgoan that same day.

It was not fair to ask the men of Kirgoan village to beat the strip of jungle in the hope of driving out the tiger which was a man-eater and was also wounded. An elephant belonging to the forest department was stabled at Kirgoan to assist with the hauling of timber, this being a prime teak-growing area. After much persuasion and a suitable promise of reward, the young mahout agreed to drive his charge through the jungle with Claudius keeping guard in the howdah, while Rex watched over a section of the river where the tiger was likely to cross.

This was a good plan but the elephant, who on a past occasion had been mauled by a tiger, soon panicked and threw the mahout off its neck. After that she was too upset to take any further part in the hunt for the wounded tiger, which made a clean getaway.

Three months later, Dad and I entered the picture in response to the station master's message.

Having walked from Ajanti station to the village of Pulkhera, where the latest kill had been made, we were met by a group of solemn villagers who led us to a hut on the very outskirts of the village. The door of this hut hung open and the air smelled of blood. An incessant buzzing rose from within the hut. We were told that the tiger killed the old man who lived there, and ate him on the floor of his own hut. We had never before heard of anything quite so brazen. I subsequently killed a leopard that stole children out of villager's huts, but tiger—never! A tiger normally puts as much distance as possible between himself and man. No one had heard a sound and the villagers were con-

vinced that this tiger was an evil spirit that could not be killed. It may have been a day or even two days later when someone was attracted to the hut by the persistent cawing of a crow.

Slender as these leads were, this was the first kill to be reported in several months, and Dad, who knew these jungles like the back of his hand, somehow felt convinced that the tiger was around. Maybe it was just an example of the hope that sustains all keen hunters where others might have given up, but he decided to tie three buffalo calves at points along the cart track between the villages of Pulkhera and Ajanti, where Bhoora had been killed some two years previously. Our plan was to stalk the baits under cover of darkness, using a slow-moving bullock cart to which the animals of the jungle pay scant attention.

The buffalo calves were soon forthcoming, and these we tied out personally. Then we asked the villagers to rent us a bullock cart with a good, reliable pair of working bulls that would be likely to hold under pressure. Soon after dark, Dad and I started down the road to Ajanti.

Dad was armed with his favorite rifle, a Jeffery's .404 bolt action which had a spotlight clamped to the barrel and three fat shells loaded with 400 grain bullets in the magazine. In the cart beside me, I had his 12-gauge Greener loaded with buckshot, and a five-cell Eveready flashlight which I carried in my hand. We were well prepared for whatever might befall us.

Sambhar stags, far back in the hills, had been calling since sundown. Chital, which were plentiful around Pulkhera, soon joined in. Presently, the jungle grew very quiet, and the rumble of the cart wheels in the dark was all that one could hear.

The outward run proved uneventful. On reaching Ajanti, we roused the inhabitants to cheer them up and let them know that we were looking for the tiger. We halted the cart beyond the last hut, gathered wood and dry grass to light a fire and unhitched the bulls. A group of men and young boys emerged from the huts to sit by the fire and talk while we brewed some tea. We were told that the tiger had circled their village only the previous night. This was three—at the most, four—nights after the kill at Pulkhera. It gladdened our hearts to hear this bit of news, and after harnessing the bulls we began making tracks for Pulkhera, having first made sure that the villagers were safely behind locked doors.

It was a little past the hour of eleven, and now that we had left the peace and comfort of the fire my teeth began to chatter, as much from a feeling of excitement as from the sharp winter cold. Gradually my eyes grew accustomed to the dark. If the tiger attacked us, there was no telling what might happen, but we were not entirely at the animal's mercy. We knew that the bulls would warn us if the tiger came in close, and as the cart rattled on we kept our ears tuned in to the other jungle sounds which also tell their story. I was tempted more than once to use the big torch in my hand, but it was vital that we did not give the game away until the final moment of confrontation.

We passed the first bait on the Ajanti side. It was

resting, still as a rock, with its head along the ground. There was another mile to go to where the second bait was tied, at the junction of the cart track and a water-course, where we knew that the chances of making contact were best. These are things one gets to know with experience.

In spite of the tension and excitement, I was plagued by a feeling of drowsiness and had to fight to stay awake. During one such struggle, the loud insistent belling of a sambhar stag acted like a bucket of ice-cold water on my senses. The ringing call with its unmistakable message filled the night, and it was then that we heard the tiger roar.

But for Dad's firm grip on my arm, I would have sprayed the jungle with the flashlight, and possibly also with my gun, but as always, the feel of his good firm grip gave me the confidence that I so often needed as a boy. Still, the flashlight was in my hand, ready for instant use. There was no need for us to say a word. We seldom if ever spoke while hunting, even under pressure, because the sound of a man's voice travels far in the wilderness. We had learned to rely on each other's instincts.

On we plodded, slowly and not stealthily, not hesitating for a moment. I waited until we were well into the middle of the dry nala bed, and then I pulled the cart up short and raked the dark, forbidding jungle with my flashlight. The powerful beam struck the tiger in the face, catching the brilliance of its eyes. He was crouching low behind the buffalo calf, but was so huge the calf was too small to hide him. Dad very quickly had his spotlight on the tiger, and just as quickly sent a bullet smashing in between its eyes. The massive animal simply rolled over, stone dead. That's the only way to hunt a man-eater.

I have one, and only one, picture of this magnificent specimen of tiger which measured 10' 1" between two pegs, and which surely weighed close to 600 lbs. although we had no way of knowing. That is just a guess—maybe he was even bigger. I took the accompanying photo next morning with my Kodak Brownie box camera, which I got for Polson's butter coupons. I had to hide my camera on our hunting trips because my Dad, whose long association with jungle tribesmen caused many of their superstitions to rub off on him, believed they brought bad luck. If I produced the camera after a successful hunt it was tolerated, but getting Dad to pose for a picture was a problem. If by chance I showed my little camera before the hunt, I was firmly admonished to get rid of it.

After an adventure like this, there is always the question, even in the mind of the most believing man, of whether or not the real culprit has been killed. In this case it was easy. We found one of Rex Hall's revolver bullets imbedded in the tiger's chest, where it penetrated five inches or less in spite of the point-blank range. When he was finally killed, this wound had all but healed and the tiger was literally rolling in fat. There is no telling why the tiger took to killing people, except that he was an old and extremely heavy animal who must have progressed a step beyond cattle-lifting. ■