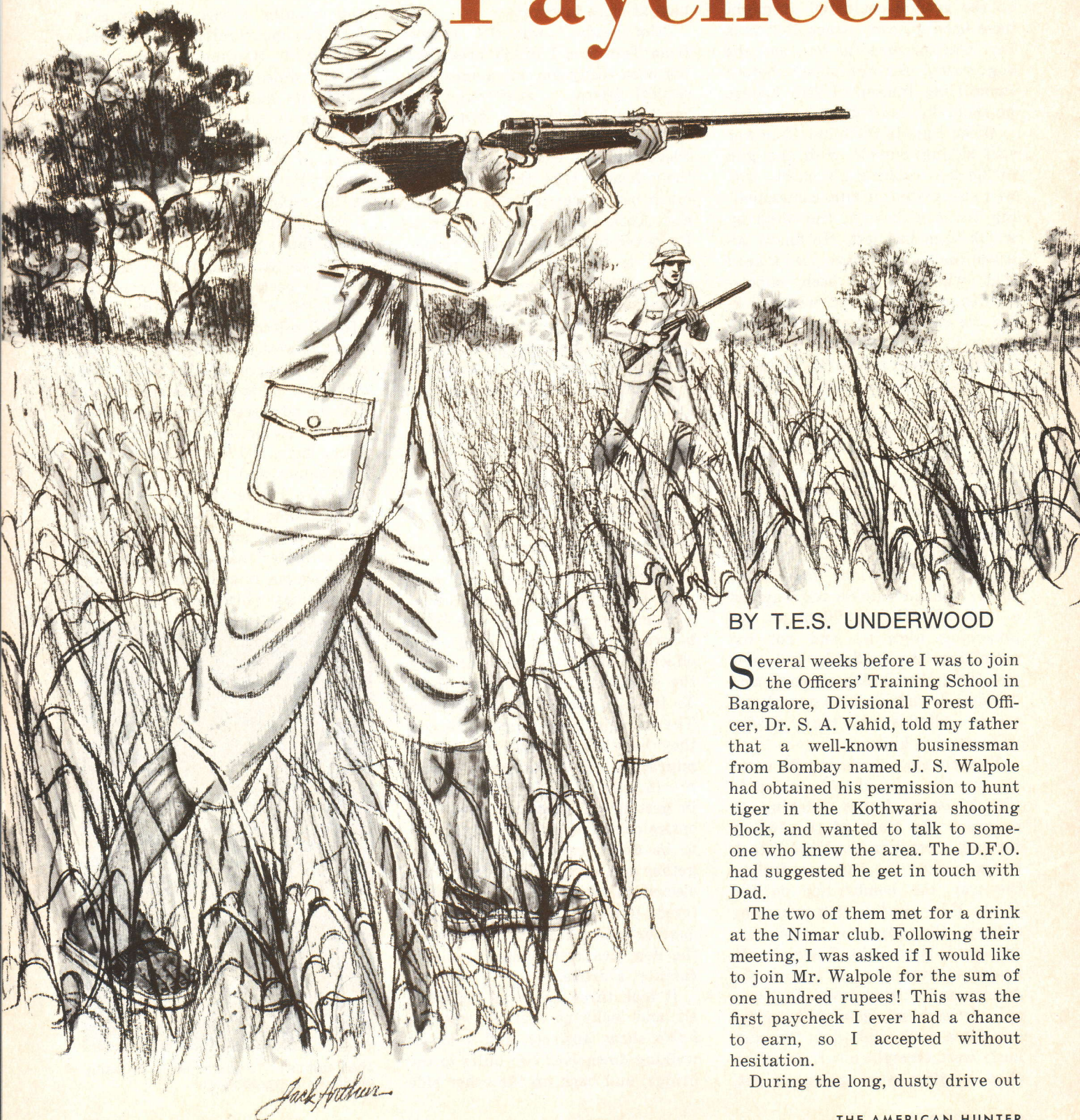


# My First Paycheck



*Jack Arthur*

BY T.E.S. UNDERWOOD

Several weeks before I was to join the Officers' Training School in Bangalore, Divisional Forest Officer, Dr. S. A. Vahid, told my father that a well-known businessman from Bombay named J. S. Walpole had obtained his permission to hunt tiger in the Kothwaria shooting block, and wanted to talk to someone who knew the area. The D.F.O. had suggested he get in touch with Dad.

The two of them met for a drink at the Nimar club. Following their meeting, I was asked if I would like to join Mr. Walpole for the sum of one hundred rupees! This was the first paycheck I ever had a chance to earn, so I accepted without hesitation.

During the long, dusty drive out





to the block, I learned from Mr. Walpole, who seemed to be a most affable employer, that his cook and bearer and another of his assistants named Bannerjee had preceded us by three or four days. They were to set up the tents, arrange for a daily supply of fresh milk and vegetables, buy young buffalo calves for bait and engage camp help. Mr. Walpole had great faith in his retainers and expressed the thought that camp would prove to be the epitome of comfort. Although this was their first visit to the jungles of Nimar, Mr. Walpole and Bannerjee had hunted many other tiger jungles. When we got to camp, it was exactly as Mr. Walpole had predicted.

Several months had passed since I'd last visited Kothwaria and met

with Mani Ram, the village chief, Soma, the shikari, and others whom we often had hired while hunting there. There was no mistaking their pleasure on seeing me again, but I could see that Bannerjee was a little unsure of my capacity. I resolved to show him, as soon as the opportunity arose, that my services would be rendered in a low-key advisory capacity. Otherwise he was to run the show. Meanwhile Soma lost no time in telling me that several tigers were operating within a three-mile radius of Kothwaria village.

Up to that time Bannerjee had been denied this information, which was often given grudgingly in hopes of detaining the party in the hunting area as long as possible.

Some people simply couldn't wait to bump off their tiger and hurry back to their clubs.

I assured the villagers that Walpole planned to stay four weeks, so they could earn plenty of bazaar money provided they cooperated with us and did a good job. This news made the rounds quickly, provoking spontaneous laughter and a good deal of noisy chatter among the growing assembly of curious villagers.

That same evening, after supper, Walpole, Bannerjee and myself pulled chairs up by the fire, where we were joined by Mani Ram and Soma to discuss the tiger crossings at which the bait would be tied. Four such crossings, known as *mokas*, were chosen. This would be



done every evening at four, and a check made at dawn or soon after to see if a kill had been made. In between, the calves would get plenty of food and shelter.

During our discussion, the two villagers sat on their haunches by the fire, occasionally poking at the glowing embers with a stick and contentedly puffing on *Chillums*, short clay pipes stuffed with pungent, home-grown tobacco. Toward the end of the meeting, as a special treat, Walpole offered them some of his Gold Flake cigarettes. Neither Bannerjee nor I indulged, but the villagers eagerly accepted. They scooped up hot coals to light the cigarettes, and sucked in great lungfulls of smoke through close-cupped hands, while vigorously nodding their approval. Thus the meeting ended on a note of optimism and mutual goodwill that belied the awful tragedy awaiting us.

Early next morning Bannerjee, a short, dark, powerful man with muscular arms and a jet-black, handle-bar moustache took off with Soma to inspect the four sites at which the buffalo calves would be tied. He seemed very much at home in the jungle. Slung over his shoulder was a slightly battered 10.75 mm German Mauser.

Walpole, who needed to rest after the long motor journey from Bombay, rose later.

It was a typically bright, sunny day, with a cool breeze blowing through camp and birds singing softly in the trees. I had planned to walk Walpole down to the bamboo-covered banks of the Tapti River, a mile below camp, where peafowl and silver hackle abounded. While unpacking his guns the previous day, Walpole had confided to me that, after tiger shooting, he liked nothing better than hunting birds with his shotgun—a slim, perfectly balanced, very handsome, straight-gripped Holland & Holland 16-gauge. Walpole was a large, heavyset person in whose hamlike fists this exquisite little piece with its 25-inch barrels looked more like a toothpick than a gun.

I'd rounded up a dozen or more young lads from the village for beaters, and when Walpole finished his breakfast, we left. I hadn't

brought a shotgun but took along my new and unbelievably accurate 30'06 in case we ran into trouble. Walpole, who probably spent 10 or 11 months of the year sitting at a desk in an air-conditioned office, was perspiring profusely by the time we reached the river. He stripped off his clothes and splashed about like a walrus in the cool shallow waters, much to the amusement of the villagers who seldom took baths.

After lining up the beaters, I walked Walpole around to a point a couple hundred yards or so in front of them. Presently the villagers fanned out and came marching toward us, gently clicking stones together and sometimes striking an axe against a tree to send the birds winging swiftly toward us. Each time we beat, I stood a few yards behind my boss, where I could watch both him and the area around him. Thus, in one of the most remarkable displays of wing shooting I have ever witnessed, I saw him swing that little toothpick of a shotgun and bring down bird after fancy feathered bird as they sped through the sun-dappled trees.

Meanwhile Soma had led Bannerjee to several sets of day-old tiger pugmarks. Though no newcomer to the jungles, Bannerjee was hard pressed to hide his excitement and confessed that he had never seen so much concentrated tiger sign in his life. He and Soma were off again at the crack of dawn next day to check on what they felt was the hottest tiger moka. I had arranged for a bullock cart in which to take Walpole stalking chital. We had heard the animals calling all around camp the previous night.

Walpole climbed into the cart behind me with his .375 double rifle, which was the only rifle he used. We ran into chital while passing through the fields behind the village, but it was too dark to tell stag from doe, let alone shoot. We'd left camp at a perfect time, and I had no doubt that we would get another chance. I myself liked nothing better than sneaking along the edge of the jungle in a soft pair of shoes at daybreak, taking just a few slow steps at a time over dew-softened leaves as my eyes scanned the

jungle for movement.

Stalking by cart at first light through all kinds of jungle, where one might expect to see anything from tiny antelope to tiger, was one of the great thrills of the time.

Walpole sat hunched behind me, contentedly puffing on a Gold Flake as we entered the dark trees beyond the fields. Weak bars of sunlight penetrated the trees, and my eyes swivelled back and forth, and back again as I spoke in whispers to the bulls. A gigantic form loomed rock-like to one side of us. I tightened my grip on the reins, and when we came alongside I recognized the head and shoulders of a bull gaur rising above the speargrass. The bull stood rock-still in the gloom, his massive horns laid back across his neck as he looked down his nose at the cart, not knowing what to make of it. I pointed the bull out to Walpole who gasped his excitement but kept his rifle well down.

The gaur or Indian bison was one of Dr. Vahid's special projects. Very, very few permits were issued for bison under him. These massive but relatively docile beasts are able to hold their own in only the densest jungle, and the systematic thinning of the forests had begun to crowd them into only a few remaining strongholds. The fact that they were bovines spared them from the poacher's bullet in a land where all else is held subservient to the cow, but even this fortuitous redemption was not enough to save the mighty Indian bison as the sharp axe of industrial growth bit farther and farther into the jungle.

So we let the bison go and moved deeper into the jungle, until we came to a park-like clearing with a spring. The cart track dipped into the water, and I let the bulls drink. Then we climbed out and immediately spotted a doe bounding nimbly along the cart track ahead of us, flashing her pure-white underparts and flag-like tail. I quietly tipped Walpole off. He twisted himself around to face the front, and I warned him to keep a sharp eye open for the stag.

About a dozen animals appeared in the woods to our right, and there stood the stag, ears sticking out past his antlers as he poised him-





self for instant flight. Walpole slid quickly out of the cart and dropped flat to the ground. I kept the bulls moving away from the stag and took my eyes off him to avoid alarming him in any way. A few seconds later a shot rang out. I stopped the cart, but Walpole went pounding past and ran on around a bend, out of sight. Mystified, I reined in the bulls and stood up in the cart to see what was going on. Soon I heard another shot, and when I drove the bulls up, there stood Walpole blowing like a whale, with rivulets of perspiration coursing down his face.

"I missed him," he panted, "and he took off running parallel to the road!"

"Then what happened?" I asked.

"I came scooting round the bend, and there he was, standing right under that tree!" He pointed to a small tree about 65 yards away. "I fired and damned if I didn't miss again!" He looked utterly dejected.

"Come on," I said. "Let's have a look."

I got out of the cart, strode over to the tree and almost immediately found blood. As I followed it, the blood trail grew progressively bigger until I stumbled on a beautiful stag lying on its side, stone dead. Walpole was beside himself with joy and fetched me a bone-rattling thump across the back.

On examining the head a little closer, I turned to Walpole with a puzzled look and declared, "That's not the stag we saw back there!," pointing to where he'd slid out of the cart. "Let's take a look."

In all this excitement, we had a little difficulty finding the spot where I had dropped Walpole off, but eventually we found it. He showed me where he'd wormed his way up by a stump, from where he'd taken a good steady shot. With him standing by the stump, I walked back to where I thought I'd seen the stag. After some minutes of searching, I found an even bigger stag lying in the grass, exactly where he had fallen. I motioned Walpole across without letting on, and when he saw the second stag he was absolutely overjoyed. This time I was ready for him and adroitly side-stepped his descending thump of appreciation.

What had happened was that there had been two stags, standing one slightly behind the other. When Walpole fired, the first stag went down as if his legs had been chopped from under him, and the second stag ran off. This is what caused the confusion, but fortunately Walpole had two chital stags on his license, and these turned out to be two of the best stags he'd ever seen. We bled and gutted both stags, and by the time we'd loaded

them in the cart, washed up at the spring and started back, it was close to noon.

Bannerjee was frantic when we got back. He had come all this way to get his boss a tiger. Here he was, waiting with a fresh kill on his hands, and I was wasting precious time chasing stags. This was a slight exaggeration, but the magic words, "Gala Ho gaya!" which mean "A tiger has killed!" have an electrifying effect on any camp, and it was a big moment for Bannerjee. Now that we were back, Bannerjee hurried off with a couple of helpers to tie a machan, while Walpole ate lunch and rested.

We were able to drive the car a couple miles toward the kill along a cart track. We then walked a mile or so to the kill.

The machan was cunningly hidden in a leafy tree, about 25 yards from the kill, still covered over with branches to keep the vultures off. Bannerjee and the two machan tiers were sitting very quietly in the shade, waiting for Walpole and myself to appear. For once the villagers had to abstain from puffing on their chillums and not a word was spoken. Bannerjee climbed nimbly up the tree, and Walpole followed, not quite so nimbly. But he got up there and after a little moving around, assumed a position that he would pretty much have to hold until the tiger showed. I passed him his rifle and spotlight. Before leaving, I moved the branches off the kill which was anchored firmly by a foreleg to a stump, and in the blood-soaked sand around the half-eaten kill, I saw the pugmarks of a tiger. We took the branches with us when we left.

Now there was nothing to do but wait. Mita Khan had plenty of good fresh meat in the cooler. The skins and capes of the stags had been rubbed with wood ash and stretched in the shade to dry. The fleshed-out skulls with antlers attached were stuck in the crotch of a tree, out of the reach of marauding jackals and hyenas. It was beginning to look like a hunting camp, and by the morrow, with a little bit of luck, we'd have a tiger.

I was fast asleep in a deck chair when a firm but gentle hand shook



me awake. "Goli chal gaya, sahib!"—a shot has been fired. Instantly awake, it seemed to me that I could still hear the tail-end of a distant echo, when the plain and unmistakable report of a second shot came rolling through the hills. I glanced at my watch—1 a.m.

"Come on," I said to Soma, "Let's go!"

Grabbing a light and my rifle, I led off down the road after leaving word for a cart to follow. I set a brisk pace through the dark, starry night, followed by Soma who didn't need a light to see where he was going. We passed the car where we had left it, and soon thereafter came within signalling distance of the machan tree. I received an answering flash from Walpole's light, which was the signal to advance, and minutes later the shikari and myself were looking over a fine big tiger where he had fallen by the kill.

Walpole, who was full of praise for the groundwork laid by Bannerjee, told me when he climbed out of the tree that his chance had come after a long and doubt-filled wait. Quite early in the evening, a peacock revealed the tiger's approximate whereabouts, somewhere near a waterhole about 200 yards from the kill. The tiger, having fed heavily off the hindquarters the previous night, made several checks on his kill after the sun went down, stealthily circling the area but never once showing himself. He was no doubt surprised to find that the vultures had left more than a bundle of bones for him to sniff at, since he'd not been able to drag the kill to a place of his liking.

Bannerjee had deliberately planned it that way, so that he, and not the tiger, could determine the tree in which to tie the machan. Often when a tiger drags a kill, it is impossible to find a tree for a good, well-concealed machan the proper distance from the bait. If the kill is moved to where there is such a tree, ten-to-one the tiger won't return. Under any circumstances a tiger is a most suspicious animal that will not come readily to planted bait; but finally, late at night, hungry by now and lulled into thinking he was safe, Walpole's

tiger returned. That night we celebrated.

Several days later, with tiger activity in our area at a bit of a standstill, I found myself following behind a buffalo calf as it plodded along a dusty path, to a place I had come to know during an earlier visit to Kothwaria. It was a long mile beyond any of the other mokas we were covering, a tough walk through hills to a place called Adam Khor. During the course of the long hot walk, I found myself meditating on the future of the knock-kneed little calf plodding up the path ahead of me.

Fate in his fickleness had decreed that male buffalo calves, at least in this part of India, were of little or no use. The females were highly regarded, being bountiful suppliers of a rich, creamy milk which became an indispensable ingredient in the preparation of Indian food. Young male buffalos were weaned much too early and put out in the jungle to fend for themselves as best they could, while female calves were coddled. It was felt that too many bulls in the herd ran the cows ragged, and tiger bait was about the only thing they were good for. As such, the birth of a male buffalo was no occasion for rejoicing. But once the animal was sold for tiger bait and assigned to a boda man, whose job it was to try and get it killed, the calf's life took a definite, if somewhat brief turn for the better.

It was an unwritten law that at the end of the shoot, surviving calves be left with the boda men. These often began to perk up and put on weight. They were then sold for a better price to the next sahib who came tiger hunting. In the rare event that a tiger passed one by without killing it, the bull is granted special status and becomes a fighting bull, with breeding privileges. It is pampered and painted in gay colors, and heavily bet on in buffalo fights during the village fairs and holy festivals, which were legion.

So I contemplated the future of the runty little fellow, whose life hung in the balance for a miserable handful of coin. Would he survive, I asked myself, half hoping? Would

he have a tiger walk by him, leaving fresh pugmarks to testify (as did on occasion happen, unbelievable though it may seem), and thus become an object of deep veneration, steeped in the ancient lore and mysticism of the jungle? Would he be spared to grow into a tough, fighting bull, to perpetuate his image through the progeny of broad-hipped, heavy-uddered milk cows?

Alas, it was not to be, but that's life. Often, all one may hope for is the slimmest of chances against impossible odds, and then to fight the hardest. The boda men said that sometimes the tiger spared the life of a calf because the little fellow dug his heels in and bade the mighty tiger come and fight. The tiger, seeing not a calf so much as a kindred spirit, smiled a farewell and departed. Who is to say it is not so.

Whenever I saw to the tying of a calf, I selected a hidden point from which to observe the bait next day. I had tied the bait at the top end of Adam Khor, a deep ravine flanked by jungle-clad hills, with an ice-cold spring flowing through it. I knew every inch of this interesting, mile-long ravine with its deep python caves and tiger hangouts. It was made to order for a tiger beat.

I had tied the calf by a foreleg to a stump by a single strand of inch-thick rope which could be easily broken by a tiger, which could then drag the bait into the bowels of Adam Khor. From my observation point early next morning, I saw that the bait was gone! A closer look at the pugmarks revealed that a giant tiger had taken the bait exactly as planned. I hurried back to assemble as many beaters as I could and returned with all of them quietly to the head of Adam Khor. I felt the excitement welling up in me as I laid my plans for the beat.

To be successful, a tiger beat must be carefully controlled every inch of the way, from beginning to end. The stops must sit at points along the flanks where the tiger may attempt to charge through before reaching the gun. If the stops catch a glimpse of the tiger headed in the right direction, they must sit tight and let him pass. If he comes





too close and tries to make a break for it, the stop must slam his axe against the tree in which he sits, so that it sounds like a pistol shot. Sometimes it works; sometimes it doesn't. It calls for careful selection of the stops and careful instruction.

The main body of beaters must advance in a solid, even line, not bunched up together, moving at a steady pace through the tangle of rocks, undergrowth, tall grass and trees, making just enough noise in the early stages to get the tiger up and moving. As the beat advances and the cone toward the gun begins to narrow, the tiger often charges back amongst the beaters who must greet this tactic with a rising crescendo of sound, driving the tiger forward to the gun by sheer bluff until, hopefully, the shot is fired.

I chased Soma and Mani Ram off by a roundabout route to tie the machan at a point about midway down the valley, along a natural line of retreat. Bannerjee and Walpole hurried off behind them, with Walpole insisting they tie the machan to allow as flat a shot as possible, but sufficiently high to place him above the undergrowth for better visibility. I knew what he wanted and approved.

When the two villagers returned, I gave the signal to advance. Down we went into the depths of Adam Khor and up along the sides of the deep and narrow valley. A hubbub of sound rose from every quarter, even and well-controlled. When we hit the bottom, where the python caves were, and where tiger also liked to lurk, the men in the middle began to bunch together. I had to

yell at them to open up. They hesitated a moment or two, then fanned out again with a vastly increased volume of sound.

The beat settled down to business; progress became steady. Peafowl took off with a flurry of wings and loose feathers, while other small creatures scurried through the undergrowth at our feet. Monkeys whooped and chattered as they swung from tree to tree, but we reached the first line of stops without mishap, and the bottle-neck began to tighten.

It was well past midday and steaming hot, a time when old tigers, especially fat and heavy ones, as this one was, hate to be disturbed and grow highly irritated when they are. Suddenly he broke, directly in front of me, no more than 20 yards away, and took off with a series of roars, right on course for the machan. A brace of rifle shots rang out. Then came silence—absolutely nerve-wracking silence.

The stop closest to the machan, perched near the top of a tall silk-cotton tree began to shout. He'd been placed there to watch the progress of the beat and report, if possible, on the results of any shots that were fired. I failed to catch what he was saying, but when men all around me began to shout too, I knew there was trouble up ahead. Suddenly I was alone on the ground in the densest part of the valley with a wounded tiger, the most formidable of all big game, lurking somewhere in the undergrowth. Anticipating just such a possibility, I had asked for and received Mr. Walpole's short-barrelled, 16-gauge

loaded with buckshot. It gave me some assurance as I gingerly advanced toward the machan.

Walpole, still sitting cross-legged in the tree, told me the tiger had come bounding past, and that he'd knocked him down both times. This I didn't doubt because the man was an excellent shot.

More important, he was extremely keen but very cool when it came to handling a gun. As he was using a .375 Holland & Holland loaded with 300-grain bullets, I began to have cautious hopes we'd find the tiger dead.

I was surprised to learn that Bannerjee had not waited for me in spite of advice from Walpole, who now urged me to hurry after his man. As was his usual custom, Bannerjee, after seating Walpole, had stood on the ground behind the machan, but somehow the wounded tiger had slipped past him. Discarding all caution, I ran after him, taking Soma with me to have him climb a tree, every few paces, and spot check the ground before us, as was my custom.

When I found Bannerjee, he wanted no part of the villager and could hardly contain his annoyance at having me around. For the first time in our brief and not especially close relationship, it began to dawn on me how recklessly fearless this muscular, stern-faced individual actually was. He was too forceful and much too impatient for my liking, and I told him so.

"Then go back!" he told me flatly.

Instead, I sent Soma back and moved a few feet to one side to cover while Bannerjee followed the blood. We hadn't taken ten paces when the tiger let go a horrible roar and charged. Bannerjee swung his rifle up, but his shot failed to stop the cat. The tiger slammed into him, knocking Bannerjee down and shaking him like a rat. I rushed right up, looking for an opening and wishing to God I had my rifle instead of this open-bored shotgun which would have filled the bill perfectly had the tiger come for me instead of Bannerjee.

I was filled with the painful image of Marklew Wilson in a similar position (see *THE AMERICAN HUNTER*, Jan. 1974). Bannerjee's



rifle, for which I frantically cast about, was nowhere to be seen. I shouted as loud as I could and loosed off both barrels in the air. Incredibly, the tiger left Bannerjee and fled.

Bannerjee, in spite of his ghastly injuries, with half his face gone and his chest bitten through, was still conscious and strangely calm. We hurried him back to camp on a bamboo litter which the villagers quickly put together and cleaned the wounds as best we could with a strong solution of permanganate crystals in freshly boiled water. We used these pink crystals to purify drinking water. Apart from them, we found ourselves woefully short of medical supplies. So after clean-

ing the wounds and tying them up as best we could, we put him in the car and raced to Khandwa.

Dr. Siddiqui, the Civil Surgeon, did the best he could, but Bannerjee knew he was going to die. This he accepted with calm dignity, only asking during a moment of consciousness that he be taken back to his home on Camballa hill, which overlooks Bombay's picturesque harbor. That was the last I saw of him.

Later, a sorrowing Mr. Walpole told me that the reason he had asked that I accompany him was that Bannerjee had grown too careless and too confident in his ability to stop anything with his 10.75. This, coupled with his fearless

nature, had eventually proved his undoing, Mr. Walpole said. True as that may be, I have never personally forgiven myself for trying to help Bannerjee find the wounded tiger, which at the time I had regarded as my duty.

Had I distracted him? Had I broken his concentration the moment the tiger charged? I will never know. All I do know is that Bannerjee held no ill will toward me at the end.

I would like to be able to say that I finished off the wounded tiger, or at least found him dead, but I never did, even though I spent a week trying. The tiger that killed Bannerjee simply vanished off the face of the earth. ■

