

DECOY FOR THE BACK- STABBER BUFF

by HAL HENESEY



Wildest of India's wildlife—gaur—a terror in the open.

The massive black shapes half hidden in the bamboo thicket ahead looked like a pair of buffalo, like any of the 200 Cape buffalo I'd killed in Africa during twenty years as a white hunter. Only this wasn't Africa. It was Assam, India's wildest province, up near Tibet. And the two tons of dark fury I was stalking were gaur, or "bison." I wiped the stinging sweat out of my eyes and tried to make Rapunji, my Assamese tracker, think I was as unconcerned as he was.

What the tough little tribesman didn't know was that, so far as Indian hunting was concerned, I was as green as any pale-faced sahib he'd ever guided. He should have caught on when I mistook the gaur for buffalo. Or later, when I shot two of them instead of the one my license entitled me to.

How could I admit to my tracker that I'd thought there was only one gaur, that I'd wounded the second one by mistake?

It was too late to worry about it now. Rapunji and I were in a tough spot. (Continued on page 79)

Expert hunters warn: never tackle this horned killer in dense, tangled brush.





Back-Stabber Buff

Continued from page 35

and we both knew it. For not more than thirty yards from us were two of the world's most dangerous animals. Both were wounded and eager to grind us to a crimson pulp with their three-foot horns. I was carrying a double-barreled .375 magnum. If they charged together it meant I would have to drop each bull with a single slug. Considering the lousy shooting I'd done on the brutes so far, I wasn't so sure I could do it. But one thing was sure. I'd have to try.

Rapunji and I moved forward. . .

It was all the fault of my friend and safari mate, Harry Durkin. Four months earlier, I'd left Rhodesia on a trip around the world, my first real vacation in twenty years. When I stopped by to see Harry in New York, he told me of his shikar to Assam, and how he had killed a gaur in the Khasi hills district. He said he considered the gaur—a great black wild ox weighing a ton or more—to be the world's most dangerous game, worse than the Cape buffalo. Only a handful of hunters had ever killed one.

That's all I had to hear. Instead of taking a boat, I flew the rest of the way to Calcutta. From there a sweltering, rickety little train hauled me up the Brahmaputra valley and into Assam. At Shillong, I rented a "block" of hilly ground 30 miles to the northeast. The native administrator said it was swarming with gaur, tiger, buffalo and leopard. I hired old Rapunji next. Then we walked for two days through the dripping jungle to my private hunting range.

For a full week I swore at the administrator for renting me a bill of goods. Except for a sambar and a barking deer, I didn't see a damned thing to shoot at. By the end of the week I was swearing at Harry Durkin. But for him, I would now be farther west in Cooh Behar or someplace, hunting—not slogging around in a swampy hell-hole, dodging leeches and kraits and getting sucked dry by malaria-carrying mosquitoes.

Just once I thought I was onto something good. Rapunji and I were tiptoeing through the bamboos one fog-drenched morning. Behind us filed two porter-skinners, their lean brown bodies naked except for turbans and breech clouts. We'd been creeping along like sorrowful ghosts for three hours now, and I was getting tired of it. Suddenly Rapunji, a few paces in front of me, stopped in mid-stride, his hand up-raised. His eyes bored through the yellow wall of lalang grass and bamboo. Visibility was less than ten yards. I halted, shifting my gun to the ready position.

Silently, Rapunji's thin brown lips formed the words, "Cheta bugh!" Leopard! In Asia, they call it a panther. But it's the same 150 pounds of spotted speed and viciousness known in Africa as one of the five most dangerous beasts. It would be a good trophy to start with. I strained my eyes to make out the slim polka-dotted form through the massed vegetation. It was like trying to see through the Iron Curtain. We shoved ahead. After ten minutes, I figured Rapunji's nerves had affected his eyes.

No! From a hedge-like barrier of thorn bushes just beyond came a slight crackling. Then silence. Long experience had taught me that a leopard is one of the fastest creatures alive. When it charges from a dozen or so feet away, you have no more than a single second in which to raise your rifle and hit a flying blur of spotted orange.

I pushed into the thorn bushes, the rifle in firing position and the safety off.

A sudden ripping sound as a fast-moving body plunged through the bush! The leopard was charging! I was so convinced of it that a split second later when a tawny form streaked past me on the right, I blazed away. In my excitement, I damn near blew poor Rapunji's head off.

We went over and looked down at the dead beast that lay twitching in the grass. It was no leopard.

"What the hell!" I muttered. "That's nothing but a mangy dog!"

"A pariah, Sahib." Rapunji nudged the reddish-yellow carcass with his bare foot. "A wild dog. See—he has a great festering sore on his back. It drove him to madness. Better you killed him than a panther."

On the way home, things looked suddenly brighter. That was when we came across the massive imprint of a hooved animal. It was in a muddy saddle between two hilltops. I took one look at the deep holes and let out a whoop. "Buffalo!"

Rapunji shook his head. "No, Sahib—gaur—the great ox. A buffalo's track is round. This one is long and narrow."

I was sore at myself for the mistake. "Who gives a damn? It's got hoofs and it's big. Let's track it down!"

Rapunji gave me a pained smile. "Look, Sahib, the tracks are old. This gaur is miles from here. We could never—" He shook his head again.

I blushed like a fool. Shows how rattled even a pro can get when in strange terrain. I followed Rapunji back to camp without saying another word.

On the next morning, it all changed. As soon as I got up, I had the feeling. It's a sort of hunch that comes only to

of thing was routine. In any case, the same rule must apply in India as well as in Africa: You track down a wounded animal and kill it. Or be killed by it.

By this time I didn't much care one way or the other. I only wanted to get the whole miserable business over with. I heaved myself to my feet and shoved off again. The flecks of blood were still thick on the leaves before me. Rapunji followed the other trail. Sometimes they blended to form one, then would separate again. After a while they became a single trail and stayed that way, although one of the gaur weaved and zig-zagged as he walked. We saw where he had rammed into a couple of small saplings, trampling them. It was as though he were having a rough time staying on his feet. That was okay with me. I knew just how he felt.

The sun was low when we finally caught up with the gaur, both of them. They led us into a narrow draw between two cliff-like hills. It was an ancient riverbed filled with reeds and grasses. The water was about a foot deep. So was the mud under it. Both sides of the shallow canyon were too steep to walk along. We had to stick to the water. As we waded and slogged clumsily after our quarry, I tried to think of worse places a guy could find himself in. There was only one. And it was beginning to look like I might get there sooner than I'd planned.

Because the gaur were dead ahead, on a narrow rise of ground covered with crowded bamboo. They were standing about twenty yards apart at the top of the rise. They knew we were coming, and why. Facing us, they awaited death. Theirs—or ours.

Now I knew where I stood. Africa, Asia or Brooklyn—this kind of situation had its formula. And twenty years of experience had taught me the formula. The gaur, almost invisible behind a dense screen of tough bamboo, were about sixty yards from me. The .375 slug, with its magnum velocity, could not be trusted to penetrate the vegetation in a straight line. If I wounded either or both of the beasts a second time, it might bring a double-barreled charge. Standing knee-deep in mud as we were, the four of us might be ground to a watery paste before I could reload.

I would have to go in closer. So close I couldn't miss.

"Stay here," I told the Assamese boys. "If they jump me, clear the hell out." I added grimly, "And don't bother coming back. There won't be anything left to salvage." I wished to God I felt as brave as I talked. Believe me, my heart was thumping out a different tune entirely!

I moved toward the waiting gaur.

I'd gone maybe twenty yards when I heard a slight scuffle behind me. Rapunji. He grinned when I gaped at him. He whispered, "The men watch, Sahib. When they see I help kill two gaur at one time, they tell all hill men. I be a very *barva* Rapunji, you bet!" The little guy carried only his useless *dao*. How gutsy can you get?

"You'll probably be a very dead Rapunji, you ass." I squeezed his wiry

shoulder. "But come along, we'll know in a minute."

It was more like five minutes. It took us that long to cover the next twenty yards. I didn't want the gaur to charge until I had my feet on solid ground. Okay, I didn't want them to charge—period.

They charged. Both at once.

They waited until we couldn't possibly escape by running. Then, from opposite sides of the canyon, they came for us like a couple of racing bulldozers. The bamboo saplings, crackling like machine-gun fire, went down before them in swift waves. I can recall only one other sight to equal it for pure terror. That was the time a herd of elephants stampeded toward me. Only the elephants were not out to kill me. The gaur were. I didn't quite see how I could prevent it.

I had to wait until they cleared the bamboo before firing. Two seconds, it took, I remember breathing my thanks that one of them was a few yards closer than the other. It would give me an instant to swing the gun.

I fired. The first gaur faltered, crumbled to his knees. I screamed for him to stay down. He rose shakily and kept coming. I fired my second and last barrel into his brain from a distance of two yards. When he fell this time one of his massive horns grazed my knee. I leaped backward with an empty rifle to face the second gaur. The blood in my head thundered above the sound of charging hooves. Even as I tried to reload, I knew it was useless.

And it was. It takes three seconds to eject a spent load from a double, slam a fresh one into the spouts, close it and snick off the auto safety. It took the gaur less than two seconds to charge that last ten yards. I was theoretically dead by one second.

The gaur charged in a straight line. He charged full tilt into the hulking body of the first one. It sounded like a head-on collision between two locomotives. His tremendous bulk went tail over horns, to land with an earth-shaking crash in front of Rapunji and me. When he gained his feet again, he was facing in the opposite direction. His forelegs spread wide, he turned, his gleaming black muzzle stretched up and outward. Desperately, he searched for us—with his nose.

He was blind. One of my bullets had creased him across the forehead, cutting through the bulge of bone above the eyes. The blood had dripped into his eyes and congealed. He had followed the other gaur, first by sight, then by scent, accounting for the strange double trail we'd followed.

There was a certain nobility about the poor brute as he stood there, his chance for vengeance lost, yet refusing to give up. As he got our wind, the huge muscles bunched in his shoulders. He got set to launch himself forward.

I sent a bullet into the great bloody head.

Rapunji and I sat down. Between us, we managed to light a couple of cigarettes. ■