

# FROM THE BAMBOOKS

I had learned to fear rogue elephants, but it seemed to be my job to get this tusksless killer. He'd emptied villages, closed the road, halted our mining work

by

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The big bull elephant killed the woman right there on the road. He'd been waiting in a little swampy gully just off the pockmarked highway which connects the small township of Gudalur, in the Nilgiri District of south India, to the seaport of Calicut on the west coast, about 100 miles away.

The elephant must have heard the ancient truck grinding up one of the many mild slopes along the road, and as it crept around a bend in first gear, he stepped out. The driver stopped 20 yards short of the bull.

He'd been warned that there was a rogue in the locality; but there was always a bad elephant somewhere in the background of his work, which was hauling timber. Half a dozen native men and women were in the back of the truck this trip. The driver was giving them a lift to the big village of Cherambadi, five miles away.

The elephant stepped out onto the road, let out a scream of rage—and charged. The driver was out of his cabin in a flash, and the others in the back of the truck were no slower. The last to leave was a woman. Seeing the elephant almost on top of her, she tried to crawl under the truck.

She was too late. The beast put one huge foot on her and squashed her into the road. Her dying scream echoed around the low hills and was the last sound heard from her or the elephant.

The fleeing party finally met another truck that turned about face and took them back to Gudalur. It was then 6 p.m., and nothing further was attempted that night.

The following morning a party of men with guns returned by truck. They warily collected the remains of the woman, retrieved the truck, which was undamaged, and hurried back the way they'd come. After that only a few intrepid drivers risked this road.

Two of these bold motorists, a couple of young coffee planters, met the rogue bull two miles from where he'd killed the woman. They saw an elephant standing under the roadside trees 100 yards ahead and wisely stopped to make sure it wasn't a wild one. The beast screamed and came for the car.

Quick as a flash both boys were out. Seeing a culvert running under the road, they wormed into this. When they peeped out, the elephant was running his trunk over the

hood of the car. Then he curled it over the radiator cap, which was sizzling hot.

Whipping his scorched trunk away, the rogue started to trumpet and smash at the old car. The boys crawled deeper into the underground drain. More crashes sounded above them, then a series of bangs going down the hillside.

After an hour they crept out. Both car and elephant were gone. They peered over the bank of the steep hillside and saw what was left of the car—a total wreck—200 yards below. They walked back a few miles to another tea estate.

Now fewer drivers used the road. The scare was on.

My company had just obtained a lease to mine in this locality. We had a depot at Cherambadi and two or three sites where we'd discovered outcrops of mica. In charge of operations on the spot was a Russian geologist named Ivan Turkovich, who was small of frame and less than five feet tall. What he lacked in stature he made up for in energy and excitability.

One morning in the big port of Madras, 350 miles away from the mines, my boss and I looked up from our desks, and there stood Ivan the Terrible.

"I cannot make a big industria of mica for you," Ivan blurted. "There is an elephant there, and he keel, keel, keel. He come from the bambooks (bamboos) wosocA like a train, and then—" Ivan turned his thumb down to signify a quick and nasty death. Wiping his face with a brilliant handkerchief large as a bath towel, Ivan added, "You must ask the government—"

My boss nodded and promised Turkovich we'd do something. I had a shrewd suspicion what he planned to do when he looked at me and raised his eyebrows. I grew up in India and had been shooting from the age of 14. I had dealt with many outlaw animals, including elephants, but it appeared to be my job to try for this one. I told Ivan I'd leave by car the following morning and he agreed to accompany me back to the depot. I didn't ask him to assist in the shooting of the rogue, and he made no such offer.

We started at 6 next morning on the long drive to Gudalur, where Turkovich had an Indian friend who owned a comfortable bungalow; here we spent the night. Before going to bed I went out onto the veranda and looked across at the Wynaad Plateau where I was headed.

The Wynaad has a varied history. Mostly it has been a feared and unexplored swampland, inhabited by elephants, tigers, lion, snakes, leeches, malaria, and wild tribes. Only within the last century has it come to light, with a gold rush and some industry—tea, coffee, and rubber. Even now much of it is very wild, and there's still the feeling that the whole expanse was somehow dropped behind God's back.

As I looked across it, over miles of rolling lowlands to the Vellaramallais range in the distance, I felt a queer sensation of wanting to run into it and get to know it, yet it sent a chill down my spine. The setting sun turned it rose-pink, then blood-red, and finally it disappeared in deep purple. I went inside and carefully cleaned, oiled, and checked my rifle.

This part of the country gets monsoon rains that start in June and carry on to September. There are days when the sun shines brightly from a cloudless sky, but generally the rains fall in a never-ending torrent punctuated by lightning and thunder. It was now the end of July—right in the middle of the monsoon.

It was raining hard when we left Gudalur next morning and crept along the 25 miles to our mining depot in the heart of the Wynaad. I kept a weather eye open for the rogue, and I could see Turkovich straining (continued on page 148)



Except for one woman, all the natives heaped from the truck and ran. The woman was trying to squirm under the truck bed

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to do the same, though he had difficulty looking out, being so short. I had my .404 Mauser beside me with five solid-point loads in it. I half hoped the elephant would be on the road, but he wasn't.

At the depot we got out in pouring rain and ran for the veranda of the comfortable little tiled-roof bungalow. It was just off the main road on which the elephant had attacked the truck and car. We saw no traffic on the way in and I now noticed none went past.

A native forest guard I got in touch with confirmed that the elephant had been proscribed (officially declared a killer and eligible to be shot without incurring a heavy fine). He gave me the official identification of the animal: Height at shoulder 9½ feet (this meant the footprint would be about 18 inches in diameter, as twice the circumference of an elephant's foot is its height at the shoulder). Age, about 40 years (an elephant's ear turns down on top about 1 inch every 25 to 30 years). It was a tuskless male, or muckna. Favorite haunt, around the locality known as Kolapalli. This information was gleaned from people who had actually seen the animal.

To be perfectly correct, a forest-department worker such as a guard or ranger should accompany the hunter to see that he shoots the right elephant. This guard was more than happy to be left at home. It's usually that way in actual practice.

Having had a final warning from Turkovich about how the "beeg keeper come soosch from the bambooks," I drove three miles up the road to an abandoned shed. I left the car in the shed and filled a knapsack—blanket, two or three tins of food, coffee, salt, and two pounds of rice. I hitched this on my back over my raincoat, slung the loaded .404 on my shoulder, and set off in the downpour for Kolapalli, three miles away.

I passed a clearing where the government was starting a cinchona planta-

tion for the making of quinine, but there was no one about. The workers had fled. Nearer Kolapalli the path wound through heavy bamboos ("woosack from the bamboos!") and I kept a careful check on the wind, blowing now in my face. The rain made visibility so poor, I felt nervous to say the least.

After an hour and a half I came to our mine site—completely deserted—and put my knapsack in one of the sheds. The laborers must have quit in a hurry, as quite a bit of trimmed mica was left lying about.

I had been told there was a Kurumba tribe settlement within a quarter of a mile of the mine, and I had no difficulty in finding it. It consisted of three small huts with a total population of no more than a dozen people, including four small children. Two of the men were away acting as outposts in case the elephant should decide to visit them.

One old man, Chelvan by name, seemed quite intelligent in a jungle sort of way. He told me the elephant often came past that way but fortunately had not noticed their huts. It had chased them time and again, however, and they were delighted that I had come to shoot it.

**I** told the tribesmen I needed their help. This they gladly offered and said they could lead me to the elephant at any time. Chelvan offered to take me to the outposts, and we set out at once. Like a dog on the scent of a rabbit, Chelvan followed a trail marked by a broken twig, a stick placed on a bush, one stone standing on top of another. In a short time we heard a soft c-o-o-o like the sound of a bird. Chelvan answered with the same call and two men climbed down from the trees.

One man said the elephant was in thick jungle ahead of us. I asked him to stay here on watch while the other approached the elephant with Chelvan and me.

We soon struck elephant tracks and the younger man pointed to them with his chopper knife and nodded. This was the one; this was the foot which had pressed the woman into the road.

We were edging around a heavy patch of thorn and bamboo jungle when we heard a branch crash. The three of us stopped in mid-stride and listened. Soon there was another crash—the elephant was lazily feeding, tucking away his 600 pounds of fodder a day. I guessed him to be 300 yards ahead.

I asked the jungle men if we could get closer. They agreed to advance another 100 yards. This took us into dense growth, so we climbed up trees to watch and wait. The elephant should finish his afternoon loafing shortly and be on his way.

I decided to take a stand beside a big tree with an open space at one side. If he came out my way I'd have about 10 yards of his walking time to pick my target. He'd be roughly 15 yards from me, so I'd have to drop him stone-dead or let him pass.

At about 4 p.m. the beast let out a couple of little squeaks and the bush started waving. He was coming nearer

and nearer. I hopped down from the tree and made for the spot I'd selected. The two natives climbed into this tree. A discolored waistcloth was their only clothing, and they blended well with the bark of the tree.

I could now see the bushes waving 30 yards away and glimpsed the bull's black back. I ran my hand around the brim of my hat to remove the drops of water, did the same to my forehead and the barrel of the rifle. Then I pushed off the safety catch and raised the rifle as the rogue neared the opening.

A meaner-looking beast would be hard to imagine. First thing I noticed was the oily secretion running out of the tiny hole near his temple. He was in must, a periodic condition connected with the rut, and during this time any elephant is likely to behave like a maniac.

I waited for him to come broadside on, so I could put a bullet into his ear and be fairly sure of stopping him cold. But he was screened by bushes again before I got an opening.

The two men scrambled down from the tree. They were afraid the rogue was on his way to raid their hamlet, so we hurried to the huts. Here my helpers called "Jutt'n ba" (come quickly) to their tribesmen, and hurried on to the mine shaft. It was their haven when the rogue neared their huts.

We spent that night in the entrance to one of the tunnels. It was damp with red mud, but we built a fire around a bend in a side shaft. After eating out of a tin and seeing the Kurumbas getting down to their meal of ragi, a kind of porridge, I spread out a couple of damp gunny sacks I'd found in a shed, wrapped myself in the blanket, and slept after a fashion till dawn.

Next morning there was a heavy ground mist. A little later the rain again poured down in earnest. After making coffee in one of the Kurumba's earthenware pots and opening another tin, I set out with my helpers to pick up the rogue's tracks. During the night the beast had passed within 50 yards of the Kurumba hamlet. He'd then gone on toward the government cinchona plantation and the main road. His tracks ran parallel to the road for four or five miles, then they lined out toward the big Karkenkotah forests miles away. We returned to the mines for the night.

After a day out in pelting rain, the mine shaft was a snug home. I shared some boiled rice with the Kurumbas and went to sleep in my damp blanket on the wet gunnies while a thunderstorm roared and crashed outside.

The following morning we hiked back to where we'd left the tracks the day before. There were no return tracks, so I walked on to my car and drove to Cherambadi to replenish my supplies. I spent the night there.

The next morning I was back at the mine for more track hunting. We picked up the rogue's fresh tracks near the tree where the first day we'd met the two outposts. His trail led past the cinchona plantation, then turned left and followed the main road. During

one of his zigzags across the road he'd pulled up a white-painted mile marker and tossed it down the bank.

His path from here led toward another Kurumba hamlet, and when we got in sight of the hamlet we knew all was far from right. The huts were smashed level with the ground, and two men who ran out to meet us told a grim story.

The rogue had arrived here after daybreak. Except for one woman, the residents were warned in time to get up a big jack-fruit tree. The woman had been 50 yards downhill, searching for a chopper she'd forgotten the day before. She ran straight into the elephant. He'd picked her up by the feet and bashed her against a tree, finally hurling away the legs, which were all that remained in his trunk. He then demolished the huts and went on his way.

We pressed on after him in pouring rain for several miles. Then we came to some very thick stuff. The leading tracker held up his hand and turned to mutter something very fast to old Chelvan, who nodded his matted gray head. The elephant was not far ahead, the old man explained to me; we'd passed some dung that was still hot when he touched it. And the younger tracker wanted to sneak up alone to locate the rogue—"Like this, like this," he said, imitating a man creeping forward doubled up.

I told the tracker to go ahead, for a Kurumba tracker knows elephants. Chelvan and I got behind trees and waited. I chewed some of his black, vile tobacco as I stood there and rubbed it on the half-dozen leeches fixed to my legs. They let go in disgust.

Suddenly we were aware that it had stopped raining—first time since I left Gudalur over 100 hours before. A watery sun tried to shine out of a patch of blue.

I was thinking about the young Kurumba woman who'd been killed that morning when the Kurumba we'd sent ahead popped out of the bushes. I nearly jumped out of my skin. He said he'd lost his waistcloth to the elephant when it spotted him at close range and charged. He'd darted around a bamboo clump, deliberately dropping his waistcloth as he went. The elephant had paused for a second at the cloth while the man ran downwind to rub out his scent, then circled back to us.

I told Chelvan and the other man to remain where they were, while the volunteer and I started up a low hill to get above the area where he'd last seen the elephant. In a few minutes we came to a shallow valley perhaps 400 yards across. The opposite slope was reasonably open, and between two clumps of bamboos we saw the elephant. He was throwing branches and bamboo stems about, and we could hear his deep angry rumble. "Rombo khovam," the tracker whispered. I heartily agreed—the beast was "very angry."

"Yentha karth?" I asked. The wind? It was in our favor, the Kurumba replied. When we'd sneaked within 120 yards of the rogue I told the tracker to

stay there. He warned me to be careful and very, very quiet. As I took a step forward he bent and touched my shoe, then placed his hands together in a mark of respectful affection. All I could manage was a very sickly grin.

Forty yards in front of me was a clump of tall bamboos. I sneaked up to this and peered ahead. The elephant was facing nearly away from me. I crept on to the next clump, 20 yards ahead. Fifteen yards from the elephant was a third clump. I decided to risk a charge to get there. If I made it I'd be close enough for the kind of head shot that would down the rogue in his tracks.

He was still facing away from me as I came closer, so I kept him in sight. He was driving imaginary flies off his body with a leafy bough held in his trunk and angrily rumbling to himself. Since he was slightly below my level, I decided to turn him as unsuspectingly as possible and try a frontal shot into his brain. My plan was to tap the signet ring on my finger against my rifle, two or three soft quick taps and the unfamiliar sound should bring him around.

Coinciding with my thought, the bull suddenly became violently suspicious. He whipped around like an agile cat and fixed his eyes on me. In a flash his ears went forward. He dropped the bough, and his trunk started to curl inward in a tight circle—the sign of the charge.

As the front sight of my rifle ran up his trunk I found time to wonder what had warned him. There are no tickbirds here. Was it the tracker behind me? Hardly. Kurumba tribesmen have been born and bred in the jungle for centuries. The jungle ways are their ways. Their chief problem is the elephant, and they know its moods and habits.

For instance, I was once confronted in the dark by a cow elephant. Things looked decidedly unpleasant until the Kurumba tracker with me took charge. He grabbed some dry grass and in a flash had a blazing torch. He then ran at the cow and almost slapped her on the face with it. The cow bolted.

**N**ow my sights steadied on the bull's head a couple of inches above his eyes, and I pulled the trigger. The beast stood stock-still as I belted another 400-grain bullet up the Mauser's spout. Then the knees of his back legs sagged forward and touched the ground. His ponderous front legs sprawled out in front and his three-ton body came to rest on the ground, chest to earth. His head still swayed slightly as I ran up and put another bullet into his ear and then one more into his temple.

The Kurumba came running down the hillside and touched my feet and my rifle with his forehead. I patted him on the back. He was still without his waistcloth and was only wearing a G-string of rag, but dress was unimportant.

I saw dried blood on the sides of the great beast, big splashes of it, and for a moment I wondered how blood got there. Then the tracker reminded me of his kinwoman, the one the bull had smashed a few hours earlier. 181 182