

by HARRY DURKIN

NOT long ago I saw a man kill a full grown tiger with a bamboo flute. The man was a leathery little Assamese with pipestem arms and a convex chest. It's unlikely that he had the strength to lift a ten-pound rifle. I'll admit I helped him a little: I put a 300-grain slug into the tiger's brain.

But make no mistake about it—credit for the kill goes to old Gundhar, the Synteng medicine man. I was merely the relief pitcher saving the game in the ninth.

I had arrived in the Khasi Hills district of Assam a month earlier. After two weeks of routine hunting, a big tiger had lost a lengthy argument with me and my tracker, Rapunji. Gunning for my second striped cat, I had let two more weeks go by. It hadn't been dull. A couple of wild oxen—as dangerous as any buffalo—gave Rapunji and me some awkward moments; so did a leopard. The rest of the bag included a sambur stag, a Tibetan black bear and assorted small stuff.

But it was tiger that had brought me to India—as it does nine out of ten sportsmen—on a sort of busman's holiday. In 20 years I had taken specimens of just about everything shootable on the African continent, both as an amateur and so-called white hunter. One tiger hunt had convinced me that Africa offered nothing to compare with this ultimate of sports. For the big silent striper of Asia makes the King of Beasts look like a court jester. He is a far handsomer animal, tougher to track down, and has greater courage.

Came the end of my fourth week on *shikar* and I had but two more days in which to collect my second tiger. Rapunji and I tried every means whereby tigers are hunted in Assam—except one. At first we did our stalking on foot. This is the most dangerous method but the most satisfying, provided you get your cat. Make a mistake, though, and it can be most satisfying to the tiger.

Falling in this, the sturdy hill man and I built a small enclosure made of thorn bushes near which we staked down a dead buffalo for bait. We waited, breathless, all night. Dozens of green and yellow lights, always in pairs, passed before us in the darkness. Only by the sounds could I recognize the jackals, hyenas, wild dogs and, once, a leopard.

After several days of this kind of suspense I dipped into my dwindling budget and hired a pair of hunting elephants. The jittery old tuskers were not the trusty *hathis* of Kipling's jungle books. It was risky enough riding them even without a tiger to worry about! I sent them back to Shillong after three days.

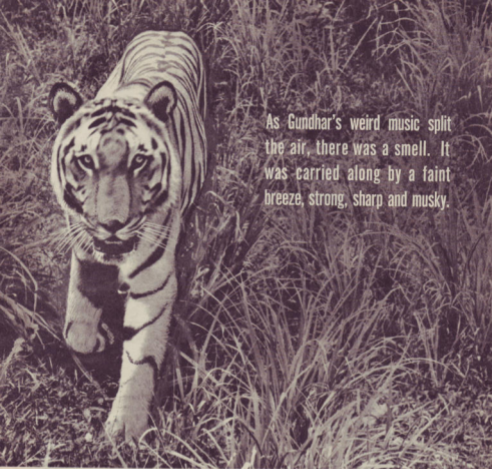
It was at this low point that Gundhar entered the picture. He was responsible for one of the strangest incidents in my lifetime of shooting for love and money.

Rapunji and I, with four work boys, had set up camp about 50 miles from Shillong, the capital. It was in the

BLOW for the TIGER

heart of the Khasi Hills, a heavily forested region south of the Brahmaputra valley. With the British out of India, there were fewer hunters roaming the jungles. We'd had no unannounced visitors for the full month. One morning just before breakfast, however, I was surprised to hear a voice growing louder as it approached the tents, a high-pitched native voice singing some sort of tuneless chant. Hoping it might be a guide with a couple of white men in tow, I went outside.

Into the camp clearing stepped the oddest figure I ever saw. He was about five feet and couldn't have weighed more than 75 pounds. The mahogany-colored face and body seemed little more than bones held together in a bag



As Gundhar's weird music split the air, there was a smell. It was carried along by a faint breeze, strong, sharp and musky.

of wrinkled skin. The eyes were oriental—those of a Synteng tribesman—and the toothless jaws were clamped tight. Around the ancient frame was a soiled white G-string. All in all, our dehydrated visitor looked like a fugitive from an Egyptian pyramid.

Rapunji, cooking breakfast, turned from the fire. "Sahib, it is old Gundhar," he said in tones of respect. "He is a maker of pooja—magic—and a priest of the cult of Thlen."

Having read up on Khasi history before I set out, I knew that the Thlen was a surviving cult whose members used to get their kicks by lopping off the heads of their enemies and eating the choicer parts. Judging from the looks of Gundhar, business had fallen off lately. He looked

awfully hungry. Now he stood gazing into the fire.

"If he's not on a hunger strike," I said to Rapunji, "invite him for breakfast—only he'll have to put up with ordinary sambur venison."

"Thank you, Sah'b." It was Gundhar himself who answered in good English. He bowed with regal dignity and padded over to my canvas chair. Without wasting time, he squatted in front of me and got down to cases.

"You look for tiger, is it not so, Sah'b?" The mummified little guy peered up at me as though knowing the answer. I nodded.

"And," continued Gundhar, "you have but two days to find one."

(Continued on page 72)



Blow for the Tiger

Continued from page 27

I glanced at Rajunji. He seemed extra busy with the cooking.

"Go on," I said cautiously. I suppose Gundhar smiled. It was hard to tell. "You will not shoot your second tiger, Sahib." Just like that. As I glared at him in surprise and annoyance, he merely looked up with that distorted grin. I decided not to bite.

After a while he went on. "But for 100 rupes, I will change the fates—and you will have your tiger before tomorrow's dawn."

I called Rajunji over. The husky little guide looked like Nick the Greek holding an ace-high flush. "You in on this deal?" I asked him sharply. Rajunji didn't know what I was talking about, he said.

"I'm not hard to live with. If it was a gag, I'd get a laugh out of it. If it wasn't, I'd get a tiger. 'You're on.'" I told the waiting Gundhar.

He held out his smooth brown palm wordlessly. I forked over a double saw-buck. This was going to be a cheap tiger—or an expensive laugh.

We set out on the "hunt" right after breakfast. Our ancient guide insisted that the four boys stay at home. It seemed that too many cooks spoiled the *pooja*. Gundhar led the way into the softwood forest, mostly pine, that covers this part of the hills. Rajunji brought up the rear. The route was down, down toward the broad-leaved jungle 3,000 feet below. I carried my double-barreled .375 H&H Magnum and Rajunji had his two-foot iron *dao*, a machete-like sword. Gundhar was armed with nothing more than a small cloth bag slung from his bony shoulders.

Toward midday we were well into tiger country. I had crisscrossed the area a dozen times in the past weeks. I knew there wasn't a tiger within cannon shot of the place. Old Gundhar, I decided, was either a con artist or a crackpot.

"Sure. Look what they said about the Wright Brothers.

Rajunji and I followed him along a zigzag trail that, if stretched out, would have reached halfway to Calcutta. Every so often the old man would pause to peer into the surrounding vegetation, his nose rippling like a rabbit's. Sometimes he would kneel close to the ground, sniffing audibly. Maybe he was a good showman—or maybe he was actually smelling for tiger! It was possible. The great cat has a strong scent that can be detected at some distance even by a white hunter. A real jungle man very likely could smell out a fresh trail.

Just before sundown Gundhar pulled

up short in a dry *swala* that would run a torrent during the monsoon. Now it contained only waist-high *alang* grass. He told us to flatten an area for a camp site. After that we sat on the grass and divided the cold meat Rajunji had brought along.

When the sun had lost its blinding glare, Gundhar said quietly, "Now, Sahib, prepare your weapon—the tiger will come soon." He said it as though he meant it.

I felt a little creepy. Like everybody else, I had heard plenty about the mysteries of the Orient—vanishing rope tricks and the like. I had figured it for 90 percent hogwash. But, like everybody else, I was vaguely worried about that remaining ten percent. With all the smoke, there must be a little fire. Right now it was burning in the old medicine man's slanted eyes.

I checked my .375, straightened the flashlight I had taped to the bottom of the barrels. I was ready to go.

So was Gundhar. From his little cloth bag of tricks, he pulled out a two-foot length of bamboo. There was a mouth-piece carved on one end, and several small holes along the top. It looked like the off-key flutes the fakirs use to charm cobras. Gundhar smacked it on his palm a couple of times the way you do a choked harmonica.

"Well, I'll be damned!" I hissed through my teeth. If this was what I'd shelled out 20 bucks for! I was sore enough to grab the old phony, along with Rajunji, and crack their skulls together. I might have, if I hadn't glanced at Rajunji first.

The hard-bitten Assamese, a veteran hunter, was staring at the leathery Synteng with popping eyes. I knew Rajunji was a lifelong Christian who didn't believe in head-hunting or the Thlen cultists. Yet at the moment he was obviously expecting something more from Gundhar than a flute solo. If a hunter doesn't have patience, he's no hunter. I sat back in the grass to wait.

The music, if you can call it that, was eerie. With the first quavering notes, the blood-colored sun brought an end to the twilight by dropping out of sight. The sky turned purple, then black. For a while there was nothing to be heard except the chilling sound of Gundhar's crazy clarinet. Then a chorus of wing-scraping insects joined in. After that, one by one, came the familiar noises of the jungle night. Already the evening was a memorable one. It was to be a lot more memorable before it was over.

The appearance of the full moon com-

pleted the picture. Its light was enough to bounce off an animal's eyes, making them glow. Before long the clearing looked like the Pulaski skyway on New Year's Eve. It was impossible to identify the dozens of headlights, but they were of all sizes. One thing was sure: none of them belonged to a tiger. When you see a tiger's eyes, that's all you see.

I began to get impatient. Also, the endless screeching of the bamboo flute was like an emery wheel on my nerves. I was a fool to wait there while a senile old Oriental tried to lure a tiger to my gun—like a Pied Piper charming a rat! Sore at myself for being such a sucker, I started to rise from my squatting position. At that moment, Rajunji gave a low gasp.

I sank down again. All the lights had suddenly gone out. Just the moon shone overhead, casting a bluish glow upon the clearing. Then I smelled it—the smell of tiger. It came on the breeze from the opposite wall of trees—strong, sharp, musky. I started to sweat. For the first time I thought of our risky position. We had no protection whatever. Out in the open, in the moonlight, we were fair game for any carnivore on the prowl.

I scarcely had time to marvel at old Gundhar who had delivered as promised. With no bait out, this couldn't possibly be a coincidence—the withered medicine man had actually attracted a tiger with his pxy piccolo!

A moment later we saw the eyes, green lamps three feet off the ground. Against the moonlit sky we could make out the tiger's silhouette. It was tough to guess the distance, but I figured he was about 50 yards away and walking toward us slowly. Nervously, I lifted my gun, finger on the flashlight switch.

Rajunji made a whimpering sound. "Be sure, Sahib. If you only wound him, he may charge!"

I checked myself. With the wind in our favor, the cat didn't know we were there. I'd give him another 20 yards. Meanwhile Gundhar never twitched a muscle. Like a mahogany statue, he sat playing. He didn't miss a note.

The tension doubled when, from the bush behind us, there sounded the snapping of a twig. Rajunji and I swiveled our heads around. No small animal had caused a noise that loud. Something big was out there in the darkness—a wild ox, maybe, or a sambar. Or...

"Sahib!" Rajunji's whisper was full of agony. "It is another tiger!"

For an instant, I saw the twin lamps glow, then wink out. There is no mistaking a tiger's eyes in the darkness. Gundhar's *pooja* was working too damn well—he had drawn two tigers to us, probably mates! Moreover, the second one had our wind. It knew we were there. It was stalking us.

I threw a hasty glance at the first cat. He was still walking toward us up the clearing. Casually, upright, unaware. Possibly he was mesmerized by the wailing of the flute. Another swish of the bushes drew my eyes back to the other. It was closer, no doubt preparing for the charge. Through it all, Gundhar's mad

(Continued on page 74)

(Continued from page 72)

music never faltered. He appeared to be in some sort of trance. Either that, or he trusted me to do my job—now that he had set it up for me.

The breeze was chilly on my body. I was soaked with perspiration. Like a couple of guys watching a tennis match, Rapunji and I swung our heads from one tiger to the other—or to the blackness where the other lurked.

The abrupt roar took us by surprise. Exploding from the dark the way it did, assaulting our eardrums like a cannon's blast, it stiffened my reflexes for a second. The echoes still bounced across the clearing as the swift rustling began. The rustling that marks a charging tiger! The big cat was coming fast—and I couldn't see to shoot!

As it emerged from the surrounding vegetation, the eyes flashed in the moonlight. I fired at them without aiming.

Some impulse—the happy result of a lifetime of training—kept me from pulling the trigger a second time.

The tiger swerved less than three yards from us and bounded back into the bush. Its noisy passage faded almost at once.

Rapunji yelled harshly. I felt his grip on my shoulder. The flute was silent. Gundhar still sat there, his bulging eyes staring straight ahead—at the first tiger. Roused from his trance by the roar and the shot, the cat was convinced that he was under attack. The moment I turned, he launched himself forward in an all-out charge. He was only 20 yards from us.

But this one I could see, even without the flashlight. I aimed. I fired my only bullet as he started his second 20-foot leap. The leap ended in a clumsy rolling tumble that kicked up a cloud of dust, blinding us. Trying to shake the grit from my eyes, I reloaded madly. I half expected the wounded tiger to burst from the cloud on top of us.

But this was a dead tiger, a tigress,

rather. We walked the six feet to where she lay twitching. I blasted her again, behind the ear, because it's the custom. Then we measured her—almost 10 feet.

Both Rapunji and I were still shaking like Hottentots on an ice floe. As for old Gundhar, he squinted nonchalantly at the dead tigress and grinned. "A good skin, Sah'b." He examined her hindquarters closely. "She has a mate. Too bad we cannot get him too. Perhaps next time."

Now I realized that the old man was totally unaware of what had gone on behind his back! He really had been in a trance. . . .

Since leaving Assam, I've learned that Gundhar isn't the only Pied Pier of tigers. This year, in Sumatra, the big strikers played hell with the natives. The mass assault was checked only when a West Sumatra medicine man was brought in. With his bamboo flute, he lured tiger after tiger to their deaths. Maybe he and Gundhar the tiger-charmer went to school together. ■