



THE BRASS RING

by RALPH HAMMER

I'd walked across an ocean of clods for that blackbuck, and it was no time to mess things up. But my legs were so much rubber

You should go after blackbucks," Hindle said. "Indian antelope with long spiral horns." Without waiting for a reply he bellowed, "I'll fix it up for day after tomorrow. But I doubt if you can hit one of the blighters."

Hindle, a short, red-faced chap with a heart as big as a bullock cart, was Y.M.C.A. secretary in New Delhi, India.

"I've got to buy a rifle," I told him. "I didn't bring one." His sharp little eyes swept over me as if he thought I were a sap to come to India without being ready to hunt. But finally he blurted out the address where we were to meet him. Ethie, my wife, wrote it down.

The girl with whom I'd said the I do's some years ago was slight of stature but as tough as fence wire. She got as much kick out of a hunt as a gal with a new convertible. I think it would have swamped our marriage boat if I'd ever tried to check her at home.

We crawled along the metaled New Delhi road in our car, barely missing swarms of Indians in flowing white night-gowns and turbans, balancing on bikes like drunks. Finally I parked under a sign: Elabee Buksh & Sons, Guns & Ammunition.

Through the cobwebs of the dingy shop I spotted magazine rifles and doubles in a showcase. Buksh, a gray-haired Indian, handed me the rifle I pointed to, a 10.75 mm. Mauser. I fondled it, looked at a couple of other weapons, then picked up the Mauser again.

"How's this for recoil?" I asked.

Buksh studied the ceiling, scratching the stubble on his chin. "No very kick," he said slowly, scarcely moving his lips.





ILLUSTRATED BY
ROBERT DOARES

I glanced at the Mauser, then hefted it. It fitted my shoulder and hands perfectly, but it was light, only 7½ pounds. The 10.75 mm. shell, 423 caliber, was loaded with a 347-grain bullet and 65 grains of powder. I could feel that steel buttplate hit my shoulder.

"Well," I grunted, "I'll have to take your word for it." The rifle was too powerful for blackbuck, but I'd been dreaming of owning a cannon like this for years.

I picked out a cleaning rod, a case, some ammunition, and paid for the whole business.

Before daylight two days later, Ethie and I wriggled from under the mosquito nets at the Hotel Cecil, stumbled into the car, and drove through the dark New Delhi streets. Our searchlights flashed on the long columns of swaying bullock carts—their drivers white-garbed, huddled, and sleeping. This was the early morning milk train.

When we found the address Ethie had copied, an Indian in khaki shorts and jacket popped open the door. He was Mr. Jon, he said, and he introduced Mr. Cleophus, another olive-skinned chap, wearing thick-lensed glasses and a big smile. Hindie showed up a few minutes later.

In the dining room a table belled under enough food for a Government House reception: a dozen kinds of sandwiches; thick slices of roast beef, veal, and chicken; hunks of frosted cake; mountains of cookies; and a huge silver teapot.

But no Mrs. Jon. Then I happened to think that Jon, being a Mohammedan, might have a harem bursting with wives and that we'd probably never get to see them.

We were busily gulping food when Cleophus suddenly burst out: "Jon, it's almost five now. We should be after those blackbucks."

But Jon kept eating. "There's a law against shooting a blackbuck on an empty stomach," he said. After he'd had his fill, we piled into our cars and drove 20 miles to a small red-brick railroad station on the edge of endless plowed ground. Copces of wispy trees topped the low rolling hills, which gradually brightened in the soft morning purple.

A bullock cart stood in the shadows. The floor was covered with an oriental rug, and the high sides were draped with blankets. There were enough pillows for Cleopatra.

A skinny driver in a bulky white turban leaned over the bullocks' rumps to keep warm. Then a spindly little Indian wearing khaki shorts popped from behind the cart. Cleophus said he was Geezu, the shikari (guide).

Ethie had a box of sandwiches she brought from the hotel. Hindie helped her into the cart, then scrambled in himself. I started to jump in too, but Geezu raised his hand and said, "Sahib, hunter. Walk."

The jet-black beauty rose high above the rest of the herd, a rearing horse on a merry-go-round. Now if only I could grab the brass ring

"That's right," Cleophus said, filling the magazine of a .30/06 Enfield rifle. "Blackbucks pay no attention to bullock carts, but they can spot a hunter a mile away. Hide behind the cart with Jon and me."

Odd hunt, I thought. Mounds of pillows and you have to walk.

Cleophus seemed to sense my thoughts. "The pillows are for your wife and Mr. Hindie. They're not hunting."

I glanced over the miles of lumpy plowed ground cut at angles by irrigation ditches. The clods looked like an ocean of broken rock, and would be as hard to walk on.

"I'm not so sure I want to hunt today, either," I said. Cleophus laughed. "You'll have to get used to the rough going."

"Take your word for it." But I dropped back with Jon, who was loading a double-barreled shotgun with buckshot shells.

The driver waved his stick and the two humpbacked Brahma bullocks tugged against the rope harness. The big wheels of the cart strained and groaned. Cleophus, Jon, and I, cradling our guns, sneaked along in a boxer's crouch, while featherweight Geezu skipped over the clods like a bag on water.

Soon the sun inched above the horizon. Tupee lifted, Cleophus mopped his forehead. Jon's brown face glistened with sweat.

Hindie had hinted that I couldn't hit a blackbuck, but there was nothing that looked like one anywhere on the horizon. Suddenly I heard the muffled blast of a shotgun. I noticed that Jon wasn't beside me. In a few minutes he charged up with a couple of quail.

"Yes musn't shoot birds," Cleophus snapped. "It scares the blackbucks." (continued on page 78)

THE BRASS RING

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"We're nowhere near blackbucks," Jon grumbled. "When I see birds, I shall blast them." But he hardly looked at the next covey we ran across.

The sun rose higher, and I walked between Jon and Cleophus in the wake of the spidery Geezu. I kept my eyes on the ground, not daring to look at Ethie and those inviting pillows.

About midmorning as we were passing a clump of a bush, the bullocks swerved sharply. Geezu leaped as if he'd stepped on something hot.

"Krait!" yelled Jon. His eyes bugged out like baseballs. He stood rigid a second, then took after the poisonous black snake. Cleophus spotted it too, and lunged after it. But the krait put on gas and made it into the bush. Jon jumped right in after it.

"Look out!" Cleophus cried. "That snake will kill you."

But Jon didn't answer. He jumped up and down, stamping, tearing at the bush and screaming. Meanwhile, Geezu skittered around like a fan dancer. Hindle went to sleep, and Ethie stared from the cart.

As if it were a crowbar, Jon shoved his gun into the holes under the bush. Cleophus moaned, "You mustn't dig with your shotgun. It'll blow up when you shoot it." Slowly Jon waded out of

the bush, a half grin on his dusky face. "The snake has gone."

He took the shotgun apart, emptied the dirt from the barrels, and put it together again. Then the driver yapped at the bullocks, and once more I swung into step over the lumpy ground.

About noon Geezu stopped the bullocks. He'd spotted a big herd of antelope kicking up dust about 100 yards away. The animals were butting, trampling, and chasing one another in every which direction. Fawn-colored with white spots, the bucks had corrugated, corkscrew horns; the does none.

I'd been sweating before, but now frosty chills raced up and down my back. I'd never seen so many animals at once.

Cleophus, Jon, and I ducked out from behind the cart. And while I was still rubbery, Cleophus bowed to me, and said, "Take the first shot."

These fellows certainly are gentlemen, I thought, but I'd really be happier if they'd started shooting.

The animals were beginning to move away; it was no time to argue. The Indians wouldn't shoot until I did, but I didn't want to plug those fawn-colored jobs any more than I wanted a harem.

Somehow I got the Mauser up. Even the 7½ pounds felt like a ton. I squeezed the trigger, and that buttplate pressed into me.

"No very kick," Baksh had said. No very kick, my eye. The rifle kicked harder than a Brahma bull.

The antelope I'd fired at ducked unteached into the herd.

Then Jon took his turn. He spread his legs, gripped his shotgun like a shovel, jerked the trigger—and was rocked back on his heels. He reloaded, then began throwing lead all over the landscape. The animals, trying to untangle themselves, succeeded only in circling into a throbbing, yellow mass.

Cleophus began to shoot. He pulled the trigger of his Enfield as if he were in a front-line foxhole and saw the whites of the enemy's eyes. Empty shells flew like hailstones.

By now I was recovered from the kick of the gun and chambered another cartridge. Then I emptied the magazine, but not an antelope fell or even wavered. The herd vanished in a cloud of dust.

Hindle was holding pillows to his ears to keep from being deafened for life. And Ethie almost fell out of the cart, she laughed so hard.

"You fellows are pretty ruddy awful," Hindle barked. "You should knock over those animals with a slingshot."

Geezu said nothing. He just stared at the horizon. The driver sneered, and dug the bullocks with his stick. Again the cart lumbered off.

I felt as low as the scales under that krait. Finally I asked Cleophus, "What were those animals?"

He was plodding along, his eyes about as low as mine. At first he didn't answer, then he said slowly, "Blackbucks."

"But they weren't black," I insisted.

"No. There wasn't a blackbuck in the herd." Cleophus must have seen that I

was puzzled, for he went on: "The does and young males are fawn color. Only the old boys are black. You don't run across many around here, but perhaps we'll be lucky and find one in the next herd."

We were all nuts: Ethie lolling on the pillows; Hindle asleep most of the time; Cleophus and Jon tramping along when they could have ridden in the cart; Geezu scanning the ocean of lumps like Napoleon looking for an army; the driver, who should have been hauling vegetables to market; and I, trying to hit blackbucks, which weren't black, with a cannon.

Cleophus and Jon had dropped behind, arguing about something. Suddenly I felt hungry. We'd had an early breakfast. I remembered that Ethie had brought a box of sandwiches along.

"How about that grub?" I called to her.

Ehie leaned over the tail of the cart and whispered, "It's all gone. Mr. Jon ate the whole business."

I wanted to tell him what I thought of him but I knew I shouldn't kick. He'd spread us to the big breakfast, and he and Cleophus were paying for this hunt, at Hindle's suggestion. So I forgot about my gnawing stomach and tried to keep pace with the rhythmic bullocks.

Shortly afterward we came to a big irrigation reservoir. There was a palm shelter on one side, and at the far end half a dozen ducks floated serenely. Hindle and Ethie clambered down, then the driver unhitched the bullocks.

Jon touched my shoulder. "I've eaten your sandwiches. Now I'm going to cook an Indian meal I hope you'll like."

I'd rather have had the sandwiches, but it was too late now. From behind the pillows in the cart Jon dug up a pot, dishes, utensils, and sacks of prepared ingredients.

Soon he had a fire going. Sliced onions went into the pot, plus rice, almonds, bay leaves, and things he didn't mention. I caught a whiff and gagged. Maybe it was the heat, or maybe it was the ghee that Jon was using for butter.

He stirred the concoction as tenderly as we would veneration. When it smelled right he set the first plate before me. But I couldn't have downed the stuff anymore than I could have eaten the driver's turban.

Then I got my first break.

"Sahib! Sahib!" called Geezu. "Black-buck!" He pointed to a dot a quarter of a mile away.

I passed my plate to Ethie, and jumped into an irrigation ditch after Geezu. I didn't want to crawl that far on the bottom of that hot ditch, but I'd do anything to get away politely.

Nuzzling Geezu's shorts, I wriggled along, sweat flooding my eyes, soaking my shirt. After what seemed like half an hour we peked over the edge of the ditch. I almost twisted off the stock of my gun, for I couldn't see that we had gained a foot.

Geezu whispered, "One more go, Sahib?"

I nodded and grunted, "O.K." So again I crabbed along behind Geezu,

choking with dust and scraping skin from my knees. Mollen sun fried my brains and burned my back.

Suddenly Geezu stopped and raised his head. I held my breath and squinted over the edge. My heart stalled, for we'd caught up with the animal. He was standing less than 100 yards away, head up, listening, a soft blending of tan and white. I wanted this one badly.

I visualized that fine head in my trophy room as I poked the Mauser over the top of the ditch. I let the front sight slide from the spiral horns to the shoulder, then took up the first stage of the trigger. But at that very instant shots boomed from the reservoir. The blackbuck whirled like a wild horse in a chute and melted into the horizon.

I slacked off the trigger and glared at Geezu. I shook my head. I wanted to choke somebody—Geezu, Jon, Cleophus, Hindle, somebody—for talking me into this phony hunt.

"Mr. Jon shoot the birds," Geezu grumbled. "Very fine blackbuck, Sahib."

I pushed over the safety. "Yea. Great. Except he wasn't black."

Geezu and I began the long hot walk back to the reservoir, but before we reached it, Jon rushed out swinging a duck. "Knocked him out of the air," he shouted, grinning. "Hope it didn't spoil your stalk."

I squeezed out a half-hearted smirk. "It was only a young buck." I smiled big, though, when we got back and found the Indian grub gone.

The driver hitched up the bullocks, Ethie and Hindle slumped into the pillows, and once more Jon, Cleophus, and I nosed the cart.

My legs felt unscrewed, the clods too high to step over. The drone of the wheels almost put me to sleep. Heat waves welled against the horizon. On top of all this I was so hungry that I almost wished I'd shoved down some of the stuff from Jon's pot.

In a few miles we struck a deep irrigation ditch. The bullocks balked like mules, but the driver whacked them down the high bank. Suddenly one wheel sunk into the sand and the cart tipped over. Ethie, Hindle, and the driver—in a rain of pots, pans, dishes, and pillows—fell into the ditch.

Loose from the pole, the bullocks galloped off like firehorses smelling smoke. The driver chased after them, but his thin legs found the going rough. The bullocks were at home on the plowed ground; he wasn't. The more speed he put on, the faster they ran. And without those bullocks our hunt would be over. We'd shoot no blackbuck and the whole gang of us would have to walk the 10 miles to the railroad.

The bullocks either lost their fear or just tired of the fast pace, for they slowed down. The driver caught up with them, then yanked off his turban and unrolled all 12 feet of it. When he tried to wrap it around them they whirled in a dusty maze of horns, hides, and tails. Finally succeeding, he led them back to the cart as docile as the day they were born.

Jon, Cleophus, Geezu, and I, with natives appearing from nowhere,

grunted and sweated until we rolled the medieval hayrack out of the ditch. The driver hitched the bullocks and we got under way once again.

After more hours of snuffing dust, rubbing sweat into my eyes, and listening to the grinding of my bones, I noticed that the lemon-shaped sun was close to the horizon. A herd of blackbucks seemed as impossible to come up with as Noah's Ark.

The driver poked the bullocks toward a range of low hills, which looked as if they'd been scraped up by a bulldozer. Geezu was crouching low, hand cupped over his eyes, the back of his neck as ridged as the cart pole. Suddenly he turned, stuck a brown finger to his lips, then jumped back. I stared over the bullocks' rumps. My heart jolted in my ears.

About 150 yards away a large herd of antelope—heads low, spiral horns of the bucks gently bobbing back and forth—was feeding on the sprouting grain, paying no attention whatever to our cart.

Brown face drum-tight, Geezu beckoned to me. Crouching, gripping the Mauser, and fingering my pocket for extra cartridges, I crept even with the bullocks' withers. Jon and Cleophus stood near me with guns ready.

The driver prodded the bullocks in a half turn, slewing the cart. Now the herd was in full view. Almost as one the 200 animals suddenly jerked up their heads.

Then a convulsion hit Geezu. He grabbed my arm and pointed to the left. On the fringe of the herd stood a dainty animal, unlike all the others. My heart clogged my throat and my lungs wanted air. This was why I'd bought this dandy rifle, why I'd been up since 4 a.m. and dragged all the leg-killing miles. I could hardly believe what I saw.

The antelope was black. Big white circles like a clown's girdled his eyes, and a broad white band slashed across his throat. I was so wrapped in just watching him that Jon and Cleophus had to tell me to shoot.

Long spiral horns laid back, one thin foreleg raised, the blackbuck was ready to take off. But it was hard to make up my mind to shoot. The Mauser seemed too much gun for the slender animal and I'd have to shoot offhand or not at all.

"What's the matter with you?" I grumbled at myself. But I knew. The hours of crouched walking and no lunch had caught up with me. I knew I couldn't hold the sights on the small black animal long enough to press the trigger.

But still I had to; they were all watching. So, barrel waving, I finally got the shot off, trying to finish the trigger squeeze as the frost head raced by the blackbuck. The steel buttplate hit my shoulder like a pile driver and I pivoted on my heels.

The blackbuck leaped for the herd, the circling does swallowing him like a drop of ink in a pond.

A fawn-colored buck was standing at the edge of the herd. Jon ran out

within shotgun range and fired both barrels, dropping the young buck.

"Don't run out like that," Cleophus shouted, "you might be shot."

Jon came back, broke his gun and slipped in a shell. "I must get just one more blackbuck." Again he charged toward the racing animals and let off another blast. Not another antelope wavered.

Then Cleophus raised his rifle, a fawn buck pushed out of the whorl and hit the dirt.

Both Indians had now knocked over an antelope. And I, the owner of the fancy new rifle, had only a pair of shaky legs to show for the day's sport. I watched the mass of bodies circling the bullock cart, fluted horns slanting like bayonets at shoulder arms. I tried to spot the one animal that was black.

Suddenly I saw him. The glistening, jet-black beauty was bounding high above the herd. For a second he was air-borne like a plane, a reaching horse on a merry-go-round. Now if I could only grab the brass ring.

I pulled the trigger, but the buck flew on. Why had I missed? I hadn't flinched. I'd lost my rubber legs, forgotten about being hungry, and was as fresh as if I'd just had a nap. Then I figured it out. The blackbuck had been at right angles from me and I hadn't led him enough.

The herd was opening up now, but still circling. Dust covered the racing bodies in a sand-colored mist. The one I wanted would stand out stark black against the buff of the herd if he did leap again.

The moment came and he did leap, swooping up in a long, sailing glide. I caught him in the notch of the rear sight, swung, and pressed the trigger. The boom rolled over the clods, but the blackbuck didn't even bat his tail.

I bit my tongue and jammed my teeth together. The thunder of the animals roared in my ears. I was sure that that gleaming blackbuck would never rise again and the herd would vanish into the dust.

Jon and Cleophus would always tell of the American who had loused up a chance at the day's only tribe blackbuck. And Hindle, until he died, would laugh in his sleeve, mumbling about sling-shots.

But, as the great herd streaked away, the black comet did rise once again. Perhaps he needed air for his straining lungs, or maybe he resented the crowding of the lesser animals. Perhaps it was just curiosity that forced him to take that last long look.

In a flash I shouldered the Mauser. And in that flash I knew that my mind and trigger finger would work together. I held even with the blackbuck's withers, following the split-second flight in the air.

I remembered the 2,300 foot-per-second velocity of the 347-grain bullet, and the arc of the animal's leap. I swung ahead and pressed the trigger, still swinging. I didn't hear the noise, didn't feel the kick on my shoulder.

At the pinnacle of his flight, the blackbuck pitched downward. The herd

dashed on, but my coal-black prize lay there.

Geezu shouted. "A running shot."

Jon and Cleophus cried, "A fine running shot. Our first real blackbuck."

"I shake your hand," Ethie yelled. "You plugged him good that time."

Hindle was standing up in the cart. "Jolly well done," he bellowed. 181 180

THROUGH THE TROUGH

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"Noontime!" someone hollered, "let's eat." We headed for a shady spot on the bank where we could cook without danger of setting the dry woods afire.

Sully numbers among his abilities that of being an excellent camp cook. Using a paddle blade as a filleting board, he got busy with the fish. As soon as the stick fire was burning down to red embers, he went to work with his frying pan. And like every good cook, he has his secret—a concoction which he mixes with flour to make the batter for the fish. The results were delicious, especially since the fish were alive almost until they went into the frying pan.

While eating, I remembered my big sunfish, and remarked that I wished we had a scale to weigh it on. Sully cocked an eye at me. "I never thought of it," he said. "Half that yellowbelly is on your plate." So I ate my chance for fame, but it tasted good.

Sully got to talking about the opportunities for float trips on West Virginia's many beautiful rivers. "So far," he said, "little has been done to exploit them. I hear there's a fellow down in Hinton who provides boats and camping outfits and guides people on floats down the New River, a fine bass stream. Everywhere else I know of you have to set up your own trip. Local fishermen can give you a lot of helpful advice.

"There's a swell day's float near here on the South Branch, where it flows through Petersburg Gap, and another on the Cacapon River in the northeastern part of the state—lots of white water and good bass."

After washing and packing our pots and pans, we shoved off. We guessed that we had the best part of our trip ahead of us—another five or six miles of unspoiled river. I made myself comfortable in the boat and flipped a cast. "Nothing to do but relax," I gloated.

We hit an easy-to-run riffle half a mile downstream, and another a few hundred yards below it. Then the river curves westward, and when it straightens out again the mountains crowd in from both sides. This is the southern end of The Trough. On the east bank Sawmill Ridge rises nearly 500 feet straight up, while on the west bank the lift of Mill Creek Mountain is almost as steep.

For a long time the only thing we saw move was a hawk circling 1,000 feet up. Then there was a flutter of white wings against the green river-bank as a snowy egret flew past us. Scarcely a ripple distorted the reflection of the mountains, and only an oc-