

FACE TO FACE

By
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A "Narrowest Escape from Death" story

Illustrated by LYNN BOGUE HUNT



ONE day late in the month of May I was sitting in the Mission bungalow fighting flies and the heat, which had gone to 120 degrees in the shade and gave good evidence of going higher. The wind was blowing hot and driving the fine sand into every corner of the bungalow. I could write my name in the dust on my desk thirty minutes after it had been brushed off.

Out the west windows the long blue lines of the ranges of the Nalamala Mountains showed sharply in the dusty atmosphere. Over these mountains deer of many kinds found their habitat. In the valleys, which were covered with heavy bamboo growth, the tiger and panther roamed and made their meals on venison and wild pig meat.

In one of these valleys, fifty miles from where I sat, was a thatched shed used by officers of the forest department. In the same valley was a perennial spring. When the hot months and accompanying winds dried up the watercourses, this valley became the rendezvous of many kinds of thirsty animals. The hot winds did not reach this recess. The mercury was not driven so high there. It afforded a better place to rest and study than the bungalow out on the hot plains. Therefore I loaded my provisions, my work and my rifle, along with an Indian guide, in the car and late one afternoon pulled up at this thatched shed.

While the car was being unpacked I strolled down through the thick forest, along the rain-washed sand paths, to see what nature had to offer. As the sun sank behind the low hills the forest

about me seemed to come to life. During the hot hours of the day everything seeks the protection of some cool, shady place. But now, quail, singly or in pairs, whirled to the right and left of my path. Peacocks on either side of the dry watercourse scolded and screamed. Far up the sides of the mountain deer barked at each other across the valley. In the distance I could hear the grunt of some pigs digging their supper of roots. Here and there were evidences where brain had buried his nose in the ground for a similar reason. But even with life apparently all about me, I was not tempted to transgress my resolve to keep quiet and let my presence remain unknown. I felt that the forest at this place offered more interesting company.

When darkness came, I wisely went back to my grass shed. On a tree near by a night bird kept up his annoying chirp all through the night. Once a huge owl broke the silence of the jungle by his "who-who."

EARLY in the morning, just when the white rays of a new day shot out over the east, I was again moving cautiously over the same sand paths to see what the night had left. There was a kind of mysterious stillness all about me. With the coming of more light, more animal life awoke, and soon the bushes were ringing with the songs of birds. Hares hopped here and there. A huge peacock took wing and sailed high over the bamboos to a quieter place.

In the sand of the path was evidence of a night visitor, the huge pug marks of a tiger. I followed them some dis-

tance through the brush to where he had rolled over and over in the sand. He seemed perfectly at ease. Why should he not be? He is king in these regions, even though he prefers to leave brain strictly alone. I felt now that interesting company had come to share my retreat.

SHORTLY after I returned to camp, a half-naked forest boy came running to inform me that a domestic buffalo belonging to his father had been killed during the night. When I went to investigate, I found a very large buffalo lying dead out in the open. The tiger had evidently struck her down about daylight and, being disturbed, did not have time to drag her to cover. All evidence pointed to a very early return, most likely at dusk.

I gave orders to have a platform put in a tree near by. At five o'clock that evening I took my rifle, blankets and lunch up into the tree. I was prepared for an all-night vigil. Mr. Tiger is a wise animal. Generally he will not approach a kill until he is pretty sure the coast is clear. Once before I sat out, and although I could hear the tiger in the bushes just beyond he never came to eat until I left the place.

In the tropics, when twilight fades, darkness drops like a curtain. Just as this curtain was dropping I was jerked to attention by the slow but steady movement of a black form. Soon it came to the buffalo and grabbed hold. The horns had been staked down. This prevented a sudden removal. I could not see the sights on my rifle, but by aligning the black barrel on the form of



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the tiger I felt confident enough to shoot. When the rifle spoke, there was a roar and a crash. Then all was quiet.

After a short wait we searched the vicinity with the flash-light, but found no dead or living tiger. I was afraid I had missed. In the early morning, however, a careful search revealed a huge nine-foot tiger stone-dead two hundred feet from where he had killed the buffalo. A man may justly feel proud of such a trophy. Yet it was so easy that a real thrill was lacking.

Some days later I moved my camp five miles farther up the valley. Here was the head of the perennial spring. It was a veritable paradise for animals which dared to enter the place. Mr. Tiger found it ideal for his game of stalking. Thirsty deer gave him no lack of a chance for his supper.

When my car pulled up under a huge tree, the forest people quickly gathered around. It was their first sight of an automobile. Our conversation soon turned to hunting. They hunt with bow and arrow. Even though some are good shots and can send an arrow to the heart of a deer or even a panther, yet my arrival with a rifle promised better luck.

AFTER some preliminary plans were made, it was decided to beat out a small area near the watercourse. I posted myself with two others about a quarter of a mile up the valley, along the side of the mountain, where there was an open space in the timber growth. It was expected that animals would come out here in their rush before the beaters. I faced the mountain, in full view of the

line of approach of any possible game. My companions faced down-hill, but were near enough to warn me of any animal coming their way.

The morning was still. Scarcely a leaf stirred. A few birds flittered here and there. Across the valley a peacock broke the silence by his shrill scream. A lone buzzard circled overhead looking for his share of some left-over feast. Otherwise the morning might have been ordered for the occasion. It was ideal.

WE were located nicely, standing on the ground back of some bushes, when in the distance the din of the beaters crashed on the morning air. Men and boys, with every device they could gather—tin cans, sticks, stones and drums—advanced, shouting and screaming. In a sleeping forest such a din moves all wild life. Soon birds were hurrying here and there in their excitement. Hares scampered through the long grass. A bunch of quail churned the air as they went by. Up in a recess of the mountain a group of monkeys added their scolding.

To be on the watch at such a time is trying. It is often a test of patience and staying powers. You dare not move or make a sound. You must see everywhere and hear everything, but not be seen or heard. No one knows what the jungle may send out. A deer may approach and as soon be gone; only quick and accurate shooting will get your game. A tiger or panther may sneak out, adding an unexpected thrill with the attendant dangers.

As I stood there, with every faculty on the alert, thoughts of all I had ever read about hunting seemed to come to

my mind for review. My heart was pounding. At times I was afraid to breathe naturally. I watched every foot of space for any sign of life. My ears seemed to spread to catch the least sound. For possibly ten minutes this tension continued. Nearer and nearer the beaters came. An occasional hare would sneak by to safety. Here and there false alarms would pop up.

Then, when hope seemed vanishing, off to my right I detected a movement in the leaves at the edge of the heavier growth. At once instinct called my whole being to attention. What was it? What could it be? Maybe it was only a bird. Why didn't it appear?

I STRAINED my ears to detect an answer. Then, out from the green and brown foliage, the sleek form of a tigress moved cautiously. She was disturbed by the beaters and was on her way to a safer place. In her mouth was the remains of a deer she had killed. Not being aware of my presence, she was coming directly toward me. Her coat was spotlessly clean. The stripes stood out boldly against the green foliage.

It was a real thrill. It was also a real test. To shoot head on called for a dead shot to prevent a tragedy. To seek to hide would reveal my presence, and possibly cause the cat to spring in self-defense. To run was equally hazardous. So I stood there, waiting for the moment when a decision would have to be made in a flash.

The tigress came cautiously on. Not a sound could I hear as she picked her way among the grass and leaves of the narrow path. Just a few feet from the path I stood behind a small bush. On she came, cat-like, to fifty, then forty, thirty, twenty and to just ten feet from where I stood.

Why I didn't shoot when she first appeared I do not know. Why did I let her get so close to me? My feelings as I stood there, gripping my rifle and watching her slightest move, can not be described. She went on by my position, headed toward some high grass just fifty feet to my left. Here she would disappear. It was a real temptation to let her slip out into the great forest, unaware of the danger near at hand. But just as she approached the exit my first and only movement since she came in view brought my gun to my shoulder.

Suddenly she stopped. Turning her head a bit to the side, still holding the deer in her mouth, she looked straight at me. My whole being thrilled. Before she could decide to spring toward me or to liberty, the sights moved to her head and the rifle cracked. At the impact of the bullet the deer seemed to pop from her mouth as she dropped. A slight movement of a hind leg assured me that the aim had been true. Experiences with an old muzzle-loading rifle on squirrels and ground-hogs in youthful days on the hills of Ohio prepared me for this never-to-be-forgotten thrill.

When the beaters came up, they were overjoyed. Killer and killed were escorted to the village to the accompaniment of beating drums and shouting and dancing. Another tiger had been bagged.