

TIGER IN THE MOONLIGHT

A Memoir of India

PLACE: Kichha, Uttar Pradesh

TIME: December 26-27, 1960

Sir Iqbal Ahmed, retired Judge of the Allahabad High Court, had arranged a winter party. Staff had set up some twenty large white canvas tents. Provisions for food and every luxury had been collected. Not least, several huge elephants had been walked in to the camp from as far as 100 miles away - for this was not to be just a delightful "tamasha" in the open air and warm sun of the Indian winter, but also a tiger hunt.

The guests of honor were Brigadier (later Lieutenant General) H. K. Sibal ("Krishen" to his friends) and his brilliant wife Tara, formerly of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs. There were also more than twenty distinguished Indian guests and only two foreigners, namely myself and my friend Ann Gooch, both of us from the American Embassy in New Delhi.

Our camp was situated on flat, open ground which bordered the southern limits of the famous Terai jungle which stretched northward all the way to Nepal. Where we were it could be described as a scrub jungle of hardwood trees and thickets interspersed with small open clearings. Since time immemorial the Terai had supported a treasure-trove of wildlife, all protected by the malaria mosquito which effectively closed off the area from excessive human intrusion. After World War II all this changed, when the discovery of DDT spelled the end of malaria and opened the Terai to agricultural exploitation. This process was already under way when we came to Kichha.

Prior to our arrival at camp, small bullocks had been tethered at various places in the adjoining jungle to attract the attention of tigers. Eventually, it was hoped, one bullock would be killed. The tiger would immediately eat half of the carcass, and then drag the remainder off into some dense thickets where it would be safe from vultures or other scavengers, while the tiger itself would sleep off its feast nearby, intending to return the next night for another meal.

Thus it was that on the morning of December 26, 1960 a Sikh tracker came hurriedly into camp to report that a tiger had killed a bullock during the night. Sir Iqbal immediately invited Krishen Sibal, as guest of honor, to go for the tiger. He, in turn, proposed that I take his place, as his friend and as a guest from the American Embassy. (Parenthetically I should insert here that even in those days of relatively plentiful tigers I was already very conservation-minded and would have preferred

to hunt the tiger with a camera, had I had a suitable one. But I was also sensible of the honor being conferred on me which I could not lightly refuse, as well as being not insensible to the excitement of going after a tiger. So I accepted with much appreciation.)

Ann Gooch and I and several of the other guests immediately set off by car to where the elephants were waiting, mounted them and went into the jungle to the place where the bullock had been killed. Then, led by a Sikh tracker, we followed the trail of the tiger and its dragged prey some one hundred yards or so to a massive thorn patch. The tracker took a rope, crawled into the thicket and tied the rope to a leg and crawled out again, whereupon the elephant pulled the carcass out into the open and all the way back to where it had been killed - an open glade between trees. One tree had a horizontal branch about fifteen feet from the ground, and to this branch we tied a charpoy (an Indian bed of wood frame and string mattress borrowed from a village).

It was now about 4:30 p.m. Ann Gooch and I stepped from the back of the elephant and took positions facing the direction of the bullock carcass from which the tiger might come. Our elephant then disappeared through the jungle toward a spot a half mile away where its mahout would await the sound of my rifle, leaving us alone. I had borrowed a superb Rigby 450/500 double barreled rifle from another friend, Brigadier D. K. Palit, in preference to a lighter rifle of my own, as insurance against the possibility of a merely wounded tiger, the most dangerous creature in the Indian jungle except for killer bees.

As the hours of silent waiting went by, we watched the daylight turn to dusk and then darkness. Soon the moon rose as we listened to the forest murmurings of the Indian night and the occasional muffled beat of tom-toms from some far off village.

Finally, at about 8:30 we heard something to our left. It was the slow, measured tread of some soft-footed but heavy animal, creeping along the grassy floor of the jungle clearing. Crunch...crunch...crunch. Suddenly the tiger appeared, looming up in the dappled moonlight until he stood over the remains of the bullock. I slowly raised the rifle and aimed for a point behind his shoulder. I had attached a flashlight to the barrels. Wishing to be sure of my aim I flicked it on. As the beam lighted the aiming point, the tiger's unbelievable reflexes reacted, hurtling him forward even as I fired. Without a sound he loped off to our right and disappeared into the darkness of the jungle.

The roar of the rifle alerted our elephant's mahout a half-mile away. He immediately put the elephant in motion, in due course presenting us with the unearthly and unforgettable spectacle of the great pachyderm emerging like a ghost, swinging majestically and silently toward us through the mottled moonlight of the Indian night. Never will I forget that image.

The elephant stopped alongside our charpoy, and Ann stepped over to his back and took her place. I descended from his side to the ground, anxious to see where the bullet might have hit, if I missed the tiger. I moved the beam of the light back and forth until finally I saw a red mist that looked as if it had been sprayed by an atomizer. This confirmed that the tiger had been hit, but where? It also meant that there was a wounded tiger nearby, and that the ground was no place for me to be. I quickly climbed up on the elephant for our trip back to camp.

On my arrival Sir Iqbal confronted me for a report. When I had finished he said that I might have hit the tiger in the lower leg or foot, or higher up on the body. In either case I must return at first light in the morning, track down the tiger, induce him to charge, if alive, and finish him off, as a wounded tiger would kill any herdsmen or villagers who might have the bad luck to pass by.

Accordingly, in the morning a party of three guns - myself, Krishen and another volunteer, plus Ann Gooch as observer - set out by car and elephant to the scene of the last night's action. We found to our consternation that a herd of goats had gone through, obliterating any sign of the spray of blood. The Sikh tracker asked me which way the tiger had run off, and I pointed my hand. He started down that track in a semi-squat, minutely examining every leaf, twig and blade of grass. After about twenty yards he stopped, shouted, and pointed to a single spot of blood on a bush at a level of about three feet from the ground. Clearly the tiger had been hit hard.

The trail continued for about forty yards further until it ran head on into a great wall of elephant grass about ten feet high. We backed off about fifteen yards, and I fired a spray of birdshot into the grass to induce a charge or growls from the tiger. No result, so the mahout took our elephant to the edge of the tall grass, seeing as he did so a cleared patch perhaps twenty yards ahead, and in it the tiger lying dead. The elephant dragged the tiger into the open where we attached ropes and with the greatest effort managed to pull and push his limp 600-lb. frame onto the elephant's back for the trip back to camp, where our arrival stirred considerable excitement.

The tiger, lowered to the ground for inspection, turned out to be a male of about five years measuring 9 feet, 10 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches over curves, and in perfect condition. One ear had been notched by a solid ball from some herdsman's shotgun, and it was said that he was a well-known "cattle-lifter." A tiger lives on deer and other wild prey, but when man comes in and destroys his habitat and food supply, he may have to live on domestic livestock. In that case he becomes a "cattle lifter" and target for destruction. Alternatively, if a tiger is shot at and wounded, gets porcupine quills in his paws or is otherwise crippled, he may become a maneater,

since only humans are slow enough, weak enough and unwary enough for him to catch. I felt the tiger's forearm. It was like a 4x4 piece of oak timber, and could break the back of a water buffalo at a blow. Sometimes tigers, passing through a line of beaters at full run, will tap one of them en route, crushing his skull like an egg. Tigers have been known to kill a cow, seize it by the spine, toss back its head and jump over a eight foot fence, cow and all!

In accordance with well-worn procedures my tiger's whiskers were first pulled out, counted and given to me, lest they be stolen. It seemed the locals coveted tiger whiskers because they could be cut into slivers and slipped into an enemy's food, causing death when eaten by penetrating the intestines. Then the two vestigial collar bones which, in a tiger, float freely in the muscles were removed because of their great magical virtues and presented to me. The skin was scraped, salted and rolled up for shipment along with the head and cape. All this, including the whiskers, was sent to Van Ingen & Van Ingen of Mysore, along with Rowland Ward one of the famous taxidermists of the old British Empire. I wrote to Van Ingen's with instructions as to the tiger's expression. I said the head should be slightly turned, the mouth slightly parted, the expression alert, serene and noble. And that is how he looks today at my West Virginia farm!

Back in camp I apparently failed to exhibit the full measure of euphoria expected after such a memorable event, feeling again regrets that I had killed such a noble animal, and that I had not been able to hunt by camera instead of gun. This was interpreted by some as my being lacking in appreciation for the great honor conferred on me. I asked Krishen to explain my true feelings, as well as my gratitude to Sir Iqbal and all the others, and I hope the misunderstanding was laid to rest.

In 1980 - almost twenty years to the day after the tiger hunt - I returned again to Kichha while on an excursion with family members to Corbett Park. Alas, there was now no jungle to be seen - only sugar cane fields, tractors and bare ground. No more wildlife to be seen. No deer, no tigers, nothing. "Progress" had arrived.

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