

The Tiger Hunt

By Fisher Ames, Jr.

Taj was a tusker ten feet high at the shoulder, with a perfect body and grandly held head, but his forelegs spoiled him as a "show" elephant. He elbowed out like Cragstop Ruffian, the champion bulldog of England, and, apart from its unsightliness, the deformity ruined his gait. The slow, swinging majestic walk so essential in a procession was impossible to him. He could never keep step to music, and his clumsy, bobbing pace invariably upset the line. So, in spite of his size and splendid tusks, the ceremonial trappings allotted to him were given to another tusker, and Taj was a candidate for a new job.

This was not long in coming. It was discovered that Taj had courage—a trait so many elephants lack. He would stand at a loud noise and set his ears, and the unexpected never put him in a panic. They tried him with a tiger-skin, and he threw it over the compound wall. When a stuffed "striper" was laid before him he screamed and shook, but this did not prevent him from kneeling the effigy and driving both tusks through it.

His career was now as good as settled. Some field-work polished him off and made a trustworthy hunter of him. He was not quite so steady as the raja's pet mount, but he was good enough to be kept for visitors who deserved special consideration; and that is how Henry Brook and his son Douglas went through an experience that they are not at all likely to forget.

Brook was the American in charge of the construction of the steel suspension bridge which was to span the river flowing along the northern boundary of the raja's capital. The bridging of this shallow but wide and treacherous river had been one of the pet projects of the raja, and Brook's plan pleased him greatly. So did the engineer himself, for his world-wide work had made an agreeable cosmopolitan of him, and he was a keen sportsman besides. Tiger was the raja's favorite game, and the first time he had a chance he invited Mr. Brook and his son to attend a hunt with him. The American was only too glad of the opportunity.

The tiger—or rather the pair of tigers—had lately made a lair on the outskirts of a village ten miles north of the capital. The country was rolling and wooded and gashed by dry nullahs—a bad spot for a foot hunter; but the gray line of elephants moved serenely and swiftly to their stations. These were less than a rifle-shot apart and made a chain of living forts extending for half a mile along the east face of the ridge where the tigers lay.

Taj was near the middle of the chain. He knew what was on foot, and his little eyes twinkled and his ears waved restlessly and his trunk crept out, testing the odors of the forest. He wore no howdah; merely a broad, stuffed pad bound to him by ropes, which served as handholds for Brook and his son. His mahout rode astride his great neck, brandishing an ankus as heavy as a battle-axe.

In the distance tom-toms and gongs boomed, and now and then the sound of a musket shot rolled heavily through the wood. It was nearly noon and very hot. A mat of interlaced branches shielded the hunters from the direct rays of the sun, but not a breath of air could penetrate them. Douglas thought it was like being under a stifling tent in August, and the half-acrid, half-musky odor of Taj's skin made him think of the circus.

It was all rather unreal to him—the drowsy forest with its strange vegetation, the booming of the distant tom-toms, the huge, still Taj and his bronze-colored, half-naked mahout, whose lips were dyed with betel-juice. And the most unreal thing of all was that somewhere on the masked ridge before him were a pair of wild tigers, man-eaters of horrible history, slinking, soft-footed and evil-eyed, toward the line of silent elephants, to break covert, perhaps, in front of Taj himself.

Little shivers, half of excitement, half of apprehension, twitched under Douglas's gray jacket; but his father's broad impassive back was a bulwark of strength, and his father's rifle had stopped game as dangerous as any in India. And there was the mahout, sitting ahead of them at the post of peril—if there was any peril—grinding away at his betel-nut as unconcernedly as a cow drowsing over her cud. He seemed almost asleep, his lids half-shut and his head bent forward as if top-heavy from the weight of the thick, saffron turban.

Watching him, Douglas saw the brown man's jaw abruptly stop its swing.

"Chk!" said the mahout, and his eyes were wide open and black.

Douglas felt Taj swell until the ropes bit deep creases in the pad. His father seemed to swell, too, in some indefinable fashion. His right elbow slowly lifted, exposing the sleek brown rifle-stock. Douglas gripped his own gun and stared hard ahead. The thick leaves and vines were motionless. A faint droning, like the hum of invisible mosquitoes, was in his ears, and off on the ridge the tom-toms boomed; but no new sound could he detect.

Then a gun roared on the left, and sounds sprang up on every side. Elephants trumpeted, twigs crackled, and a flock of brilliant birds flashed dazzlingly by. Almost under them ran a long, lank beast, whose stripes were as bright as ink and gold—a fearful thing, with a square, snarling mouth and evil green eyes that threatened them.

The mahout uttered his thin, bird-like "Chk!" and curled up in a ball on Taj's broad neck. The gun-barrel hung

steadily over his turban, and it seemed to Douglas that his father would never pull the trigger. The forest seemed perfectly still again. Something thick and choking was in his throat. He wanted to shout, but the powerful, slab-sided beast riveted every sense, and he watched its advance open-mouthed.

His heart jumped with strong relief when the rifle cracked. A momentary diaphanous wisp of smoke blurred his sight. He had a confused view of the tiger, whirling and leaping, and then the rifle cracked again. The mahout said something shrilly, and Taj's head went up with a mighty toss as a long, yellow-and-black body curved through the air directly at them.

Douglas saw the great face, white-tushed and wrinkled with rage, just before the contact. The sinister eyes were fixed, not on Taj, but on his riders, and when the beast struck the elephant's forehead and clung there with ripping



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