

In The Jungles of the Night

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II

THE MAN-EATER OF MAYAGHAT
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The killer stalks at night, when hearth fires have burned down to ash and embers, when the air is as still as the earth. Owls and nightjars have fallen silent. Bats return to their roosts. Even the insects, gorged with blood, settle into the torpor of darkness. Only the lispng river continues without pause, a black vein pulsing in the night. The killer makes her way through the forest without being seen, though her eyes penetrate the shadows and her ears are alert to the slightest sound. In the jungle, death assumes many shapes and guises but with the stealth of her approach, the whisper of her breathing and the soft tread of her paws, she is almost formless...like a terrifying dream, or the memory of a violent struggle...intangible fears distilled out of darkness.

Coming down the slope of a ridge between the straight columns of sal trees, she slips into a ravine and crosses a jumble of rocks, avoiding the heavy tendrils of bauhinia vines, hanging like snares that could hold a bull elephant. A bamboo thicket blocks her way as she turns downstream, pausing to sniff at the soft sand, where a spring leaks into a shallow pool. She laps the water gently, as if licking one of her cubs years ago when she was a young mother. Now she is old and thirsty but lured by the same instincts, though her pace has slowed—a festering wound in her right shoulder causing her to drag her forepaw. Yet, even with her broken canines and the relentless pain in her leg, she is capable of killing to keep herself alive.

Where the ravine empties into a dry riverbed, and the stream disappears beneath rocks and sand, she cuts across the open ground with a deliberate swiftness, intent on finding the sheltering jungle beyond. The scent of a sambar teases her instincts and for a moment she hesitates, distracted by the deer. But the killer is in pursuit of easier prey.

Ahead, the forest opens into a wide clearing where hundreds of trees have been felled and the sour-sweet odour of sawdust taints the air. Without breaking stride, she passes through a labyrinth of logs and ragged stumps. On ahead, she can just make out the low profile of a canvas shelter. She wrinkles her nostrils at the rank stench of human sweat. The killer has learned to overcome her revulsion for this odour and the fear acquired when one of her cubs was killed and a bullet seared the muscles of her shoulder and left her crippled. Yet, this has become the smell of survival now, the only scent that can appease her hunger.

Crouching near a stack of timber, she waits and listens to the murmur of snoring under the lean-to shelter. Traces of wood smoke unspool from the smouldering fire. Exhausted labourers sleep together in a disorderly line, most of them wrapped up against the winter chill. Dew hasn't fallen yet but moisture is gathering in the night air, as the temperature drops and the warmth of the day disperses, allowing condensation to form a humid layer above the fallen trees. If she kills now, there will be plenty of time to feed before first light exposes the layered ridgelines to the east.

Moving forward, she picks her victim—a young woman who lies a few feet away from the others on a pallet of rags, her newborn child beside her. The killer has no sentiments for maternity, though she has borne six litters in her prime. With a sudden rush of controlled aggression, she springs and catches her prey by the throat. The child's mother is dead before she can awaken, teeth puncturing her throat and constricting her windpipe, as vertebrae snap at the base of her skull. The lassitude of sleep gives way to limp gestures of death. The predator hoists her victim in a fluid pirouette, throwing the woman's body over her left shoulder so that her injured forelimb bears less of the weight. Wheeling about in silence, she carries her victim away.

Only the sleeping infant is awakened, wailing for its mother, now gone forever.

ONE

Jim had built the machan using an old string cot that he had tied across the forked branches of a jamun tree, twenty feet above the ground. It overlooked a game trail that crossed the Baur Canal about a mile from his home in Kaladhungi, a place he had known since childhood when he first hunted here with a catapult and muzzle-loader. Jim had spent the night in the tree so that he would be in position at dawn, ready for any animals that passed below his hide. Leaving his rifle at home he had armed himself with a new Rolleiflex camera, purchased a few months back at Hazlett's Studio in Nainital.

The stars were still out when the first birds began to sing and he could see Venus through the branches overhead, a gleaming white pearl above the horizon of foliage. With the crowing of red junglefowl and the syncopated cries of barbets, the sky began to brighten in the east. No matter how many times he witnessed this moment, it always aroused in him a profound sense of elation, as if the world were being recreated before his eyes.

Six years ago, he had returned from his first trip to Europe, commanding the 7th Kumaoni Labour Corps, serving in the war against the Kaiser. Like the five hundred men he led, Jim had never been outside India before. Each morning, camped on those foreign fields, he arose before dawn and listened for the familiar sounds of the jungle but all he could hear were wrens or robins singing in a tattered hedge. For most of their tour, he and his men remained safely behind the front lines, repairing roads and digging ditches. The guns were usually silent at this hour, unless some general had ordered a dawn assault. Mingled with the ambivalence of warfare, he had felt a strange sense of homesickness, a longing that he shared with his men, all of whom were recruited from the hills near Nainital. Jim's greatest satisfaction had been to bring 499 of the 500 Kumaonis safely home. Only one man had died, during the passage at sea. They had done their duty by the king-emperor and returned unscathed. Now, as Jim sat in the machan and waited for light to enter the forest, he remembered another kind of darkness on the fields of France, where destruction greeted the dawn rather than creation, the chemical stench of annihilation. Sometimes, Jim still had nightmares because of what he'd witnessed and he woke with a feeling that everything around him had been obliterated.

But soon the outlines of the trees appeared, their shapes etched against the brightening sky. Two boar shouldered free of the underbrush and trotted below him but there wasn't enough light to take a picture. Then he heard the belling of a sambar, a hundred yards to his right, warning that a predator was on the move. Jim knew each of the tigers in this forest and guessed it might be a young male he'd first seen as a cub two years ago, tumbling after his mother. By now he would be full grown, aloof and restless. The sambar called again, a little closer now. The sound was like a muted trumpet, a metallic cry of alarm. A flock of seven sisters picked up the warning and passed it on by jungle telegraph to a hawk cuckoo that screeched hysterically. Two chital stags, their horns in velvet, came down the path. Jim caught them in the viewfinder, able to make out their spotted coats in the shadows though it was still too dark for a photograph. Their alarm cries, moments later, were higher pitched than the sambar, like the startled yelp of a child.

Jim had positioned himself on his knees, the ropes of the cot digging into his shins as he leaned forward, facing the game trail where it emerged from the jungle. Most animals that passed this way would pause before crossing the narrow Baur Canal, which was three feet wide.

As minutes went by and the forest fell silent, he wondered if the tiger had taken another route, cutting across the canal further up, perhaps. It was cold and the camera felt like a brick of

ice in his hands. He consciously stopped himself from shivering inside his sweater, a frayed relic from military service, one of the few things he'd brought back from Europe, along with a Parisian vanity set for Maggie, which had a mirror with a painted scene of a boy on the back, playing a lute under a willow tree. She'd laughed when he presented it to her. 'For my boudoir!' she joked, though he could see the delight in her eyes. For his mother, Jim had bought a crystal vase, war loot sold discreetly in a French village. These gifts made it seem as if he'd simply gone as a tourist and returned with souvenirs. Jim hadn't told Maggie most of what he saw of the war. But he'd carried back the empty casings of two brass artillery shells retrieved from a gunner's battery, suggesting they could use them as umbrella stands at Gurney House.

Once more the sambar belled. This time it was less than twenty yards away. Seconds later, he saw the deer step out of the bushes directly in front of his machan, a large doe with a distinctive raw patch on her chest, a sore spot, indicating she was in oestrus. The sambar stamped the ground anxiously, knowing the tiger was close by but unsure of which direction to escape. There was just enough light for a photograph but Jim resisted the temptation, knowing the tiger was likely to follow. He focused on the sambar, her eyes wide with fear as he observed her in the viewfinder.

Then, in a flash, the deer was gone, bolting across the canal and into the trees. Jim's teeth began to chatter from the cold but he clenched his jaw and waited. Ten seconds passed. Twelve. As he counted thirteen, the tiger stepped into view. It was the young male, as he had supposed, a handsome creature with a unique pattern of stripes along both sides of his face that made him look as if he had sideburns. Jim recognized him as he adjusted the focus and pressed the shutter release.

The click of the camera made a sound no louder than the scrape of a match but the tiger heard it immediately and glanced up. His face showed no fear but every feature was attentive, full of concentration. Jim wound the film forward, certain the sound would scare the tiger off before he could take another photograph. Yet the amber eyes continued staring at him, as if the animal recognized who it was watching from the tree above.

After the second photograph, the tiger took a step backwards so that only his head was visible but he allowed half a dozen pictures, before finally retreating into the shadows of the leaves. Altogether, Jim and the tiger stared into each other's eyes for a good three minutes, though it seemed as if an hour had passed. Once he was gone, Jim gave a whoop of delight as he wound the frame forward and closed the camera with excitement. He reached inside his sweater and drew out a cigarette case. Lighting one with satisfaction, he lowered his camera bag to the ground and scrambled down from the tree.

There was no sign of the tiger. As he walked home, Jim calculated the exposure he'd used and went over the shutter speeds in his mind, reassuring himself that the photographs would surely turn out. Ten minutes later, he reached the Kaladhungi Road and walked the last hundred yards to his gate, which had recently been repaired after a herd of wild elephants had knocked it down. As Jim entered the compound, a scruffy mix of stray and spaniel raced towards him, barking eagerly. Stopping to pet Robin, he lit another cigarette and drew a cloud of tobacco fumes into his lungs after a night of deprivation. The first few smokes of the day were always the best, driving out whatever demons were lodged in his lungs.

Maggie was in the kitchen stirring porridge.

'A telegram arrived last night, after you left,' she said. 'A runner brought it down from

Nainital. From the Commissioner.'

Jim wiped his camera down with a soft rag and then carefully put it away in its case. Only then did he open the folded piece of paper on which the message had been glued. It was brief and to the point:

MAYAGHAT MAN-EATER CLAIMS FIFTH VICTIM
STOP YOUR PRESENCE REQUIRED STOP
PROCEED IMMEDIATELY STOP REGARDS WYNDHAM