

Chapter 1

Facing Death in the Dark



"Man has tasted tiger's blood for centuries without having been tasted much in return. Now it is the time for them."

- Billy Arjan Singh

THE AFTERGLOW OF THE SUN LINGERED OVER THE FARMLANDS OF GHOLA. The air was cold. The two men settled in the front and driving seat of the Gypsy were Billy Arjan Singh and his brother Balram, while I with Aftab Wali, the Assistant Wildlife Warden of Dudhwa National Park and my old native tracker Phagunia were seated in the rear boxbody of the vehicle. I had a .416 magazine John Rigby rifle loaded with heavy caliber bullet of 410 grain, metal covered, with 70 grain smokeless powder that generates a striking power of 17 tons; an immensely potent wallop for any large sized, dangerous animal including elephants.

Phagunia had a .32 Indian Ordnance pistol holstered at his waist, while Billy had lent Aftab his Holland & Holland .375 Magnum rifle. The fatal weapon had a very tough safety lock but an exceptionally weightless trigger that fired at the hair touch of the finger and even our protagonist Billy was unsure as how to operate its tricky mechanism. The gun's reliability had so deteriorated that it often fired upon at the sheer unlocking of safety catch.

The ungodly weapon was as unusable as a cricket bat against a tiger and juxtaposed to Billy, this act was also uncharacteristic of him for as a rule he had always kept his firearms in excellent condition.

We were on our way back to Tiger Haven (Billy's residence) from Sathiyana forest range. No one spoke much. The radiation fog that usually settles in the night had begun to take over the tract. The sound of the Gypsy's engine as it moved off seemed to drill into the peace of the evening. We had driven about a couple of miles, when we passed close to the hutments of a small village Gajraora. Daylight was on the point of withdrawal and the brightly pinpointing stars had begun to lurk here and there, when we saw a figure silhouetted gently against the fragile light, sitting in a squatting form with its back towards us. Distinguishable as large animal, it was looking towards the lonely hamlet. The headlights and extra lights of the vehicle were instantly put on.

Disturbed by the cutting beams the animal turned his face towards us, his eyes reflecting the glare with the ambiance of burning fire. This was the man-eater of Ghola that had terrorized the villagers and squatters of the farmland for over a month.

Aftab had often seen this tiger earlier; he immediately recognized it, confirming its identity and the hunter's problems were enormously simplified. Our unanimous thought was to deal with it immediately; a right moment to give the quietus to this terrible menace. Not bothering as who shall shoot the tiger – Billy, Aftab or I – I rested the gun on the open iron bar and aligning on the tiger that was some fifty yards away slowly slipped the safety catch off to fire. The gun was dunked with hyper lethal bullets, proven tiger killers that mushroom inside the body as they carom around slashing everything in their path. I was about to fire when Billy reached his hand, grabbed the barrel crosswise and pushed it vehemently down with force. It shocked me awfully, stopping me from pulling the trigger.

"Nooooo, this is not the man-eater," he said emphatically, turning his neck and looking into my eyes. Though Aftab ruled out the possibility of this being the wrong tiger and even Balram questioned if it was not the man-eater then what the hell the fella was doing so close to a human habitation. But Billy by some peculiar process of deduction, declared it to be a tigress and as resolute as ever, appropriated the Rigby from my hands. He even unwittingly evoked his sarcasm upon me: "This is your sugarcane tiger boy, and you want to shoot it!" Billy was thoroughly critical of my sugarcane tiger theory, because I had branded his pet tigress Tara reintroduced in wild, not as wild but as feral tigress, just as pet cats readily go feral, and this nomenclature was a pain in his neck. However, this was no good moment to scoff a sniper shot at me when the tiger was there.

Save for the old man everybody was dead sure of the animal being the actual man-eater, earmarked for annihilation. For a moment I thought that the old fuddy-duddy will slip down the car noiselessly, track with heroic skill and shoot from my gun as his gun was quite useless for any emergency. I sat quiet but no shot rang in the vista, moments later the tiger slipped into the thicket of sugarcane and silently dissolved his stripes into it.

All five of us got down from the vehicle, Billy holding my rifle like a broom, which he didn't put back in my hands despite my asking. Aftab led the way breaking trail with that ungodly gun, while I followed him literally disarmed, feeling the absence of the reassuring weight of a .416 in my hands. Phagunia was behind me with a ready pistol in his hands, which in any case was virtually useless against a dangerous mega fauna. The tiger had indeed vanished like ectoplasm though the ammonia of his 'very musky' urine, much stronger than normal squirted on a tree slapped us in the face. A farmyard could be attar of roses in comparison with the vile stench that saturated the ground and atmosphere because the marking fluid with its base in uric acid is loaded with many chemicals like cadaverine, phenylethy-lamine and

putrescine including pheromones that stimulate sexual activities in opposite sex but reek pungently. We examined the tracks, which showed to be definitely of a male and by all possibilities the right tiger. Darkness had set in. Beyond the radius of thirty yards, the inky blur of nightfall hid everything in its fold and at such a time rooting the man-eater out of thick sugarcane was not our idea of good fun.

The Gypsy's headlights shown brilliantly on the undisturbed vista while the only shadows cast by Billy and his brother were falling upon us long and wavering. There was no indication of the killer being around but under the circumstances he could have easily taken any one of us at a point blank range in a single stride.

"Professor Saheb, I don't think we need to follow blindly along the trail with this dum-dum gun," said Aftab, "in case the tiger has not moved away and makes up his mind to launch an attack at this moment, we will be in trouble." I also felt the same. Perhaps the tiger was still around and fully aware of our presence, perhaps watching us clearly or might even have taken a position of advantage by now. Evaluating the danger involved in this performance, when I had no weapon for self-protection, and our tracking could influence its behavior made my skin crawl. We immediately left the tracks and came back to the vehicle.

Our return journey to Tiger Heaven was a bit frustrating; Balram was absolutely unable to rationalize his brother's incorrigible stand which was perhaps an impossible opinion. Though he and his brother were well attuned to each other in jungle matters but now the identity of the man-eater was no longer in jeopardy, he grumbled all the way and was thoroughly critical of Billy.

Despite an impressive know-how about all tiger hunting expertise available in the Tarai represented by our confirmed killer team, the end goal, however did not harmonize at all. In fact it turned out to be a fatal mistake on our part to let the stamped killer past the worst.

The tiger hadn't gone anywhere. He was actually very much close at hand, veiled in the deep darkness of sugar, avoiding us, thinking on its legs and watching us intently. About an hour after our departure, he didn't waste much time in sorting out a human victim. The petty farmer, named Budhai was leveling his field, in the semi full moon, just behind his hutment with buffalos yoked to a plank when the tiger suddenly materialized from behind the thick trunk of a *Neem* tree, seized the man, and without pausing to kill, dragged him into a sugarcane retreat. Hearing his shrieks, the rescuers ran protesting and the killer jogged away leaving the man but in that short time, the scissor shaped incisors had created large holes in his neck and chest and sheared away a huge chunk of meat from the back. The man was rushed to a dispensary five miles away but he died in the way from the rupture of major blood vessels bleeding excessively.

Next day when the news of human kill arrived, the place and the timing of the kill directly corresponded with our presence on the spot and we all including Balram and Aftab felt shocked as if reduced to impotence. We felt the answerability of Budhai's death rested squarely on our shoulders for had we availed the fine

opportunity last evening, the man would not have met this gruesome end. There was nothing we could do about it but to wince and admit the setback, as the sight of wretched man's remains haunted me for many days.



The end message of the story is that tiger matters require subtle judgments and a hunter often has to fall back on his own resources of instincts, based on subconscious accumulations of past experience. Under the influence of the old man we were rather guided by his predispositions and hadn't done what our real instincts told us.



Thunder Claps and Tiger Roars

"If a man proves too clearly and convincingly to himself... that a tiger is an optical illusion-well, he will find out he is wrong. The tiger will himself intervene in the discussion, in a manner which will be in every sense conclusive."

- G. K. Chesterton

The day after this tragic incident a heifer was tied towards the afternoon close to the spot where Budhai had been condemned. I with Phagunia and Aftab –designated to lead the shooting team – perched ourselves on the *machan*. Our armoury on that day comprised a .12 bore shot gun, a 30 Springfield rifle and as usual my .416 Rigby; the gun that was once the emblem of Nairobi based Norfolk Hotel, where the most colourful bunch of professional hunters ever draw together for sundowners. The gun was needed to qualify for an unrestricted professional hunter's license in Kenya besides years of hard big game hunting experience that constituted a most serious business.

Extended before me was the immense sugar biome of Gholia, 3000 acres of old buffer area, the land configuration of which is in a shape of a cup; with a lake in the center that stretches immediately outside the park opposite Sathiyana range. It was once a favoured haunt of swamp deer, and now had been cleared of *ratwa* and *narkul* grass and turned into prosperous cultivation fields. Every year during winter months, tigers came to live here without break in the sugarcane crops, which are planted right up to the boundary of the forest. But this time the tiger that had come to live here had developed a sweet-tooth for villagers, taking to serial human killings.

This tiger later branded as the Gholia man-eater, operated in an exclusive farmland area falling between Puranpurwa, Gadaniya, Mehangapur, Gajraora and Padua. It was this phase that while visiting Dudhwa, I became involved in this man-eater's hunt for a week's time.

That day we had been on the *machan* for over four sunny hours. As dusk fell, the February evening started getting chilly and soon a storm begun to build up over Sathiyana range. Enormous piles of clouds appeared in the east, obstructing the golden rays of the declining sun. The clouds grew like a brown rose that flickered splendidly from within. The sky blazed with most vivid lightning and a drizzle started slowly cooling the earth.

Not long before, the winds escalated and a ferocious thunderstorm rolled in. The torrents of rains waved over the boundless expanse of cane and a heavy sheet of water drenched us to the innermost. There was no use sitting for the man-eater so we decided to abandon the vigil. Phagunia packed my rifle in a plastic cover and we started the walk back to our camp in Ghola. The village was some two miles away as the crow flies. We took the cart track that wound past the sugarcane fields. It was an unusual evening with strange lights and thick brown clouds, and the village was half an-hour's walk away. After walking for just about five minutes, I was like a drowned rat as streams trickled inside my jacket, giving an uneasy sensation to my body. It was too dark to distinguish objects on the ground that had become fairly watery and there were splashing sounds as we put one squelching foot behind the other. Walking in the incessant flashes of lightning and thunderbolts was quite a toilsome experience. Intermittently the farmland glistened green, as the vault of heaven rent asunder and then it would be dark again, as dark as the inside of a black sack.

With lashing winds adding to our woes, we sensed quite a few dark inky masses of wild animals crossing our path. They appeared uneasy and apprehensive, moving like specters in some fearful disturbance and there was no misunderstanding about it. More animals followed. We heard the characteristic trampling of their hooves on the drenched ground. None of us were actually able to identify the passing animals when a flash danced in the sky, and the light did not seem to illuminate so much as to penetrate the wild animals, which was in fact a sounder of wild boars.

As we toiled forward we came upon lots of swamp deer in a green wheat field. They had come out on their nightly feeding rounds, standing like phantoms with their backs to the driving winds and rains. One swamp deer fawn never moved at our sight though we passed it within 5 yards. He was shivering with cold and standing with its head down between its forelegs. It gave the impression of a dim ghost that was praying for stillness and peace to return.

The expanse of Ghola farmlands falls in a low-lying band where the water cascades down from higher surroundings creating a temporary deluge. The water level had suddenly risen and its unbroken sheets appeared to threaten us with inundation. My men, though used to severe thunderstorms, were apprehensive and wanted to hurry back home and I am also not exactly among those who might be called afraid of the dark, but I do not deny that a certain percentage of my boldness disappears with the passage of daylight. It was this moment when the nature's deadly drama began.

There was silence for half a minute when the interjection of a tiger floated in the air. I heard a clear call *h-oo-w-m- aauangh-aauangh* that was much different from the gurgling rumbling of clouds. It sounded so loud that it was difficult to guess the direction it was coming from. But I felt sure that it came from very close to my left. The call had an instantaneous effect on an unseen herd of blue bulls. There was consternation in the cane fields, followed by stamping of several hooves as several antelopes crossed the cart track before us. Their shadowy silhouettes, parallel to huge phantoms, bounded forth in a mad flight. My heart leapt to my throat. No hiding of the fact that they crossed so close and at such a pace, that I was afraid. The blue bulls are toughened animals which might make even a Jeep overturn should they hit it on the road. A man on their stampeding route would stand no chance.

All of us halted in our tracks and letting the blue bulls pass, moved our torchlights over the fields. Nothing was visible clearly in the pelting rain as a sheet of blurring haze covered the objects around. But soon to our left, the outline of a head became clear as a pair of burning eyes reflected the glare and we all recognized them to be that of a tiger.

The environment was not conducive for any meeting with a tiger, when my rifle was in its cover. Very slowly I uncased the gun but I had to load it since per habit I had not left a cartridge in the chamber while covering it. The surroundings seemed to be charged with a nervous tension as I loaded the gun swiftly and mechanically. Unfortunately the cunning beast understood my gesture and before I could line the beads he retreated slowly. His dark shadow shifted up to a *neem* tree and then vanished.

After a few minutes' silence, the short loud calls of *auaangh, auaangh* again emanated from the diametrically opposite direction of North. The solo singer, perhaps a different tiger growled quite a few times then his calls ended in a long drawn staccato *huh-uh-uh*. Shortly after, this rumbling call was responded from the South; deadlier and angrier than the first and roughly from the same distance as that of first.

Quivering with adrenalin we listened to ferocious growling's. There were apparently two tigers, located some hundred yards away from each other. A straight line drawn between them would have crossed my stomach. But all this was only a prologue to a drama that was about to begin. The darkness was thick again and it was hard to realize that we had inadvertently reached in the midst of two great cats that were not finding themselves fitting to co-exist with each other. The rain lashed strongly, a blinding flash ran zigzag in the sky and a terrific crash of thunder boomed. With that, their real dialogue started. The two giants steadily increased measuring the colossal strength of their lungs. They roared their questions and replies so aggressively that the confab soon turned into a deafening serenade, awesomely terrifying.

Our every nerve was drawn tight. It seemed that the balance of power was being tested by vocal means rather than force. There was another exploding *aaom* that temporarily seemed to hold the forked sheet of lightning suspended in the sky. This was no long distance communication. The tigers were keen to meet and were approaching dangerously closer to each other. Roars, growls and coughs are specific signs in tigerine language, and since I don't speak it, I could not understand whether it was meant to convey rage, hunger or love. It could also be just their capricious temper, which can change from good to bad like sunshine to thunder; or perhaps by co-incident their royal route had just collided tonight.

There is a vast difference between tiger roars emanating two miles away and twenty yards away. In my forty years of proximal jungle time, I have heard enough of their roars, having experienced some half a dozen similar dark hours in the past. But I had never witnessed anything frighteningly adventurous like this. In April 1977, when treed by a cub rearing tigress at Bela village that moved around my tree showing displeasure, I had faced tiger roars from closest quarters. I could stand them because I was on a safe perch and when the story was revealed to the press, I had daringly stated that no music is more beautiful than a wild tiger's roar in his home. But 8 years after that incident, this instant experience when the predators were hounding around us unseen, my opinion about tiger roars was fully altered.

Defiant tiger roars are stupendous, that might dreadfully equal the vibrations of a supersonic plane taking off. These spatial warnings, preserving the sanctity of a tiger's freedom, have an uncanny power to full-fill encompassing space, sometimes so wholesomely that they make you feel fearfully small. Unsure of their accurate location, you sense 'a premonition of death' and the loud growls begun to reverberate in your stomach.

The hair on the back of my neck tingled. The setting gave me a feeling of being in an immense theater of nature where the play had started but the curtain had still not lifted. Phagunia wiped the rain water from his face and was the first to fire his gun, followed by Aftab, who boomed quite a few rifle shots in the direction of the roars. Under such wild conditions of weather and place, I would really have preferred any other kind of sound imaginable than this 'chilling to the bone' music of power struggle, in league with the gut-wrenching powers of darkness which then seemed as if it would never end.

Interestingly, the big cats were not concerned with our presence; even gun firing had achieved no effect on their aggressive postures. Aftab was sure that this offending tiger was *the* man-eater. He said the attention of rogue was so engrossed in chasing his rival that "the risk of we being attacked by him was reduced to zero."

Tiger fights are rather like a squabble between domestic cats, in which far more time is spent in bounding, snarling and threatening each other by growling rather than engaging in actual physical confrontation. Blows are exchanged only briefly

and are divided by long periods of posturing and maneuvering where the real purpose is to chase the rival away and not to kill it. After enough of a verbal duel, the stronger one started chasing the weaker which ran away, apparently not wanting any kind of physical confrontation.

The tigers were now thoroughly involved and baying for each other's blood. Next we heard the characteristic thumping of their paws on the swampy ground, as the curtain partly lifted on the play and the actors passed from close quarters. Then suddenly there was more crashing of canes, shrill screaming and snarling as the tigers passed through dense canes. By far sugarcane is the worst country to face dangerous predators and a hopeless vegetation to be enveloped in when matters are serious. It is especially so when one is dealing with irate tigers, which have been known to cover hundred yards in just over four seconds when charging. But such chase is intermittent, and the speedy bouts last for a few seconds. They tire easily and after a few moments, sprint again.

However, no human being can withstand these powerful animals and if the devastating killers collided with us headlong, the enormous projectile energy of their terrible claws, with hundreds of pounds of their weight, would instantly inflict fatal wounds.

The situation was not to our liking but Lord Hanuman's grace kept our courage high over fear. Phagunia again boomed the .12 bore shot gun, the lead ricocheted in the clouds that appeared normal with the raging hurricane but the tigerine chase remained unaffected. Perhaps the weaker one, being pursued with insatiable furry and having perceived human presence, was trying to seek protection through our intervention. He was not ready to leave our neighbourhood.

The climax of the drama had begun and it seemed wise to put ourselves further out of reach. With mingled astonishment and unease we slowly squelched our way, through the stubborn clay, furtive and bedraggled in the pelting rain when the hectic runaround completed a few more circles and the sparring continued for good ten minutes around us. Like madly sputtering rockets, they circled twenty to thirty yards in canes and then crossed the cart track. At every one to two minutes, I would hear the distinctive thudding of their paws as their ghostly forms crossed the road. Sometimes from our back, sometimes from the front, sometimes sliding through the mottled murk and sometimes literally air-borne – but they were never more than 20 yards far from us.

The sugarcane was as thick as the human wrist and often so tangled that it was impenetrable at any pace, yet it broke like matchsticks against this ferocious struggle. I could clearly hear the splashing paws, the panting sound of air being sucked in through their mouths, admonishing each other in a piercing falsetto. The electrifying experience held us mesmerized in the awe of super predators.

I dared not put my rifle down for it was my only life insurance. The unique conversation of super cats was more of a tolerable zephyr as compared to this

high voltage chase which now seemingly foretold an earthquake. It was remarkable that the strong paws with tough springy cushions that allow tigers to stalk their prey with deadly silence produce so much of sound when running.

I did not want to experience as to what it feels like having a tiger's large body across my neck, yet the sounds of those thumping paws were a trifle more communicative than the brain-paralyzing impact of their ultrasonic dialogue.

A streak of flame, in the meanwhile zoomed in the clouds and like gigantic white splinters of broken glasses, wrecked from a cosmic window, it dispersed here and there in the sky so that everything visible was bathed in pure white light and the shadows were pure black – no less.

We were sure that the chasing tiger was the man-eater of Gholia, while the other one, driven out of the jungle by the raging savannah fires, had just arrived in the cane fields. Phagunia was mumbling gibberish, "Goli Maro Saley ko", (Bust the bastard without delay). The fella had been a lifelong hunter. He wanted us to attempt just plain bum shooting at the chaser. In his view if we three stood ready together and fired a fusillade as soon as the tigers broke cover, the bullets might strike the man-eater's heart and lung from the broadside. But I was partly hesitant because my earlier jungle training had tutored me to not to take running shots at unwounded animals. Moreover, there are many uncertainties in tiger hunting; outstanding sporting qualities were demanded of the man who should bring down the chaser neatly in the dimming lights without plugging the wrong one, which at least I did not possess. And above all in such weather conditions, there was a fair chance of being maimed or killed by tigers than succeeding in busting them. Finally when Aftab also declined to handle the man-eater, I gave up the thought.

The play was drawing to an end. After hanging overhead for an hour, the rain suddenly stopped as unexpectedly as it had begun and with that the sparring and growling also attenuated. The storm passed and the period between the flashes and crashes denoted its movement towards west, where the tigers also followed and went away into the depths of larger sugar farms. The temperate growls of the benefactor, perhaps still in chase grew fainter as the duo faded out in the vast sea of sugar grasses.

The relief from enormous tension was palpable. We restarted our journey back for the camp watching the pall of clouds that was suddenly divided into two as the silver sickle of the moon and a few stars began to peep drowsily from the floor of the heaven. The combined light of heavenly bodies dispelled the darkness and shed a faint glow over the vista of sugar fields that seemed all silent as if nothing had happened there.

A week after this incident, I was in Lucknow when the Gholia man-eater was shot dead in a joint operation of Forest Department, managed by Aftab Wali with Raja Somendra Shah and Billy Arajn Singh. Billy claimed in his books to have shot the man-eater himself that was later perforated by unrestrained *feu de joie* firing;

however foresters and locals maintain that the tiger was done away by Raja Somendra Shah.



The end message of story is that the squabble of great cats is no mock fight but is essentially a lethal encounter. It taught me that once a tiger has adapted to a particular area as his home range, he strenuously resists any attempt on the part of any other tiger to infringe upon his preserve. This does not happen often but when it does, there usually is a fight to decide which animal shall remain in the disputed territory and which shall leave for good. These are, I believe, the only occasions when fights occur, except during the breeding season. However, the experience left me believing that even resolute man-eating tigers that deliberately seek human prey and don't land in territorial competition for prey with normal tigers, do *not* prefer crowding in their range and, for many other reasons, guard their territory equally well. Even though man-eating is not a natural phenomenon, the tiger, in essence, remains a tiger insofar as its natural instincts are concerned.