

The Tiger's Heart

By Jim Kjelgaard

- 1 The approaching jungle night was, in itself, a threat. As it deepened, an eerie silence enveloped the thatched village. People were silent. Tethered cattle stood quietly. Roosting chickens did not stir and wise goats made no noise. Thus it had been for countless centuries and thus it would continue to be. The brown-skinned inhabitants of the village knew the jungle. They had trodden its dim paths, forded its sulky rivers, borne its steaming heat, and were intimately acquainted with its deer, tapir, crocodiles, screaming green parrots, and countless other creatures.
- 2 That was the daytime jungle they could see, feel and hear, but at night everything became different. When darkness came, the jungle was alive with strange and horrible things which no man had ever seen and no man could describe. They were shadows that had no substance and one was unaware of them until they struck and killed. Then, with morning, they changed themselves back into the shape of familiar things. Because it was a time of the unknown, night had to be a time of fear.
- 3 Except, Pepe Garcia reflected, to the man who owned a rifle. As the night closed in, Pepe reached out to fondle his rifle and make sure that it was close beside him. As long as it was, he was king.
- 4 That was only just, for the rifle had cost him dearly. With eleven others from his village, Pepe had gone to help chop a right of way for the new road. They used machetes, the indispensable long knife of all jungle dwellers, and they had worked hard. Unlike the rest, Pepe had saved every peso he didn't have to spend for immediate living expenses. With his savings, and after some haggling, he had bought his muzzle-loading rifle, a supply of powder, lead, and a mold in which he could fashion bullets for his rifle.
- 5 Eighty pesos the rifle had cost him. But it was worth the price. Though the jungle at night was fear itself, no man with a rifle had to fear. The others, who had only machetes with which to guard themselves from the terrors that came in the darkness, were willing to pay well for protection.
- 6 He did not know what awakened him, only that something was about. He listened intently, but there was no change in the jungle's monotonous night sounds. Still, something was not as it should be.
- 7 Then he heard it. At the far end of the village, near Juan Aria's hut, a goat bleated uneasily. Silence followed. The goat bleated again, louder and more fearful. There was a pattering rush of small hoofs, a frightened bleat cut short, again silence.
- 8 Pepe, who did not need to people the night with fantastic creatures because he owned a rifle, interpreted correctly what he had heard. A tiger, a jaguar, had come in the night, leaped the thorn fence with which the village was surrounded, and made off with one of Juan Aria's goats.
- 9 Pepe went peacefully back to sleep. With morning, certainly, Juan Aria would come to him.

- 10 He did not awaken until the sun was up. Then he emerged from his hut, breakfasted on a papaya he had gathered the day before, and awaited his expected visitor. They must always come to him; it ill befitted a man with a rifle to seek out anyone at all.
- 11 Presently Pepe saw two men, Juan Aria and his brother, coming up one of the paths that wound through the village. Others stared curiously, but nobody else came because their flocks had not been raided. They had no wish to pay, or to help pay, a hunter.
- 12 Pepe waited until the two were near, then he said, "*Buenos dias.*"
- 13 "*Buenos dias,*" they replied.
- 14 They sat down in the sun, looking at nothing in particular, not afraid any more, because the day was never a time of fear. By daylight, only now and again did a tiger come to raid a flock of goats, or kill a burro or a cow.
- 15 After a suitable lapse of time, Juan Aria said, "I brought my goats into the village last night, thinking they would be safe."
- 16 "And were they not?"
- 17 "They were not. Something came and killed one, a fine white and black nanny, my favorite. When the thing left, the goat went too. Never again shall I see her alive."
- 18 "What killed your goat?" Pepe inquired.
- 19 "A devil, but this morning I saw only the tracks of a tiger."
- 20 "Did you hear it come?"
- 21 "I heard it"
- 22 "Then why did you not defend your flock?"
- 23 Juan Aria gestured with eloquent hands. "To attack a devil, or a tiger, with nothing but a machete would be madness."
- 24 "That is true," Pepe agreed. "Let us hope that the next time it is hungry, this devil, or tiger, will not come back for another goat"
- 25 "But it will!"
- 26 Pepe relaxed, for Juan Aria's admission greatly improved Pepe's bargaining position. And it was true that, having had a taste of easy game, the tiger would come again. Only death would end his forays, and since he knew where to find Juan Aria's goats, he would continue to attack them.

- 27 Pepe said, "That is bad, for a man may lose many goats to a tiger."
- 28 "Unless a hunter kills him," Juan Aria said.
- 29 "Unless a hunter kills him," Pepe agreed.
- 30 "That is why I have come to you, Pepe," Juan Aria said. A troubled frown overspread his face. "I hope you will follow and kill this tiger, for you are the only man who can do so."
- 31 "It would give me pleasure to kill him, but I cannot work for nothing."
- 32 "Nor do I expect you to. Even a tiger will not eat an entire goat, and you are sure to find what is left of my favorite nanny. Whatever the tiger has not eaten, you may have for your pay."
- 33 Pepe bristled, "You are saying that I should put myself and my rifle to work for carrion left by a tiger?"
- 34 "No, no!" Juan Aria protested. "In addition I will give you one live goat!"
- 35 "Three goats."
- 36 "I am a poor man!" the other wailed. "You would bankrupt me!"
- 37 "No man with twenty-nine goats is poor, though he may be if a tiger raids his flock a sufficient number of times," Pepe said.
- 38 "I will give you one goat and two kids."
- 39 "Two goats and one kid."
- 40 "You drive a hard bargain," Juan Aria said, "but I cannot deny you now. Kill the tiger."
- 41 Affecting an air of nonchalance, as befitted the owner of a firearm, Pepe took his rifle from the fine blanket upon which it lay when he was not carrying it. He looked to his powder horn and bullet pouch, strapped his machete on, and sauntered toward Juan Aria's hut. A half-dozen worshipful children followed.
- 42 "Be gone!" Pepe ordered.
- 43 They fell behind, but continued to follow until Pepe came to the place where Juan Aria's flock had passed the night. He glanced at the dust, and saw the tiger's great paw marks imprinted there. It was a huge cat, lame in the right front paw, or it might have been injured in battle with another tiger.
- 44 Expertly, Pepe located the place where it had gone back over the thorn fence. Though the tiger had carried the sixty-pound goat in its jaws, only a couple of thorns were disturbed at the place where it has leaped.

- 45** Though he did not look around, Pepe was aware of the villagers watching him and he knew that their glances would be very respectful. Most of the men went into the jungle from time to time to work with their machetes, but none would work where tigers were known to be. No one would dare take a tiger's trail. Only Pepe dared and, because he did, he must be revered.
- 46** Still affecting nonchalance, Pepe sauntered through the gate. Behind him, he heard the village's collective sigh of mingled relief and admiration. A raiding tiger was a very real and terrible threat, and goats and cattle were not easily come by. The man with a rifle, the man able to protect them, must necessarily be a hero.
- 47** Once in the jungle, and out of the villagers' sight, Pepe underwent a transformation.
- 48** He shed his air of indifference and became as alert as the little doe that showed him only her white tail. A rifle might be a symbol of power, but unless a man was also a hunter, a rifle did him no good. Impressing the villagers was one thing; a tiger was quite another.
- 49** Pepe knew the great cats were dappled death incarnate. They could move with incredible swiftness and were strong enough to kill an ox. They feared nothing.
- 50** Jungle-born, Pepe slipped along as softly as a jungle shadow. His machete slipped a little, and he shifted it to a place where his legs would not be bumped. From time to time he glanced at the ground before him.
- 51** To trained eyes, there was a distinct trail. It consisted of an occasional drop of blood from the dead goat, a bent or broken plant, a few hairs where the tiger had squeezed between trees, paw prints in soft places. Within the first quarter-mile Pepe knew many things about this tiger.
- 52** He was not an ordinary beast, or he would have gone only far enough from the village so his nostrils could not be assailed by its unwelcome scents and eaten what he wanted there, then covered the remainder of the goat with sticks and leaves. He was not old, for his was not the lagging gait of an old cat, with which he had leaped the thorn fence with a goat in his jaws was evidence of his strength.
- 53** Pepe stopped to look to the loading and priming of his rifle. There seemed to be nothing amiss, and there had better not be. When he saw the tiger, he must shoot straight and true. Warned by some super jungle sense, Pepe slowed his pace. A moment later he found his game.
- 54** He came upon it suddenly in a grove of scattered palms. Because he had not expected it there, Pepe did not see it until it was nearer than safety allowed.
- 55** The tiger crouched at the base of a palm whose fronds waved at least fifty feet above the roots. Both the beast's front paws were on what remained of the dead goat. It did not snarl or grimace, or even twitch its tail. But there was a lethal quality about the great cat and an extreme tension. The tiger was bursting with raw anger that seemed to swell and grow.

- 56** Pepe stopped in his tracks and cold fear crept up his spine. But he did not give way to fear. With deliberate, studied slowness he brought the rifle to his shoulder and took aim. He had only one bullet and there would be no time to reload, but even a tiger could not withstand the smash of that enormous leaden ball right between the eyes. Pepe steadied the rifle.
- 57** His finger tightened slowly on the trigger, for he must not let nervousness spoil his aim. When the hammer fell, Pepe's brain and body became momentarily numb.
- 58** There was no satisfying roar and no puff of black powder smoke wafting away from the muzzle. Instead there was only a sudden hiss, as though cold water had spilled on a hot stone, and the metallic click of the falling hammer. Pepe himself had loaded the rifle, but he could not have done so correctly. Only the powder in the priming pan flashed.
- 59** It was the spark needed to explode the anger in the tiger's lithe and deadly body. He emitted a coughing snarl and launched his charge. Lord of the jungle, he would crush this puny man who dared interfere with him.
- 60** Pepe jerked back to reality, but he took time to think of his rifle, leaning it lovingly against a tree and in the same motion jerking his machete from its sheath.
- 61** It was now a hopeless fight, to be decided in the tiger's favor, because not within the memory of the village's oldest inhabitant had any man ever killed a tiger with a machete. But it was as well to fight hopelessly, as to turn and run, for if he did that he would surely be killed. No tiger that attacked anything was ever known to turn aside.
- 62** Machete in hand, Pepe studied the onrushing cat. He had read the tracks correctly; for from pad to joint the tiger's right front foot was swollen to almost twice the size of the other. It must have stepped on a poisonous thorn or been bitten by a snake.
- 63** Even with such a handicap, a tiger was more than a match for a man armed only with a machete – but Pepe watched the right front paw carefully. If he had any advantage, it lay there. Then the tiger, a terrible, pitiless engine of destruction, flung himself at Pepe. Pepe had known from the first that the tiger's initial strike would be exactly this one, and he was ready for it. He swerved, bending his body outward as the great cat brushed past him. With all the strength in his powerful right arm, he swung the machete. He stopped his downward stroke just short of the tiger's silken back, for he knew suddenly that there was just one way to end this fight.
- 64** The tiger whirled, and hot spittle from his mouth splashed on the back of Pepe's left hand. Holding the machete before him, like a sword, he took a swift backward step. The tiger sprang, launching himself from the ground as though his rear legs were made of powerful steel springs, and coming straight up. His flailing left paw flashed at Pepe. It hooked in his shirt, ripping it away from the arm as though it were paper, and burning talons sank into the flesh. Red blood welled out.
- 65** Pepe did not try again to slash with the machete, but thrust, as he would have thrust with a knife or sword. The machete's point met the tiger's throat, and Pepe put all his strength and weight behind it. The blade explored its way into living flesh, and the tiger gasped. Blood bubbled over the machete.

- 66** With a convulsive effort, the tiger pulled himself away. But blood was rushing from his throat now and he shook his head, then stumbled and fell. He pulled himself erect, looked with glazing eyes at Pepe and dragged himself toward him. There was a throttled snarl. The tiger slumped to the ground. The tip of his tail twitched and was still.
- 67** Pepe stared, scarcely seeing the blood that flowed from his lacerated arm. He had done the impossible; he had killed a tiger with a machete. Pepe brushed a hand across his eyes and took a trembling step forward.
- 68** He picked up his rifle and looked again to the priming. There seemed to be nothing wrong. Repriming, Pepe clasped the rifle with his elbow and seized the machete's hilt. Bracing one foot against the tiger's head, he drew the machete out
- 69** Then he held his rifle so close to the machete wound that the muzzle caressed the silken fur. He pulled the trigger. The wound gaped wider and smoke-blackened fur fringed out. All traces of the machete wound were obliterated. Pepe knew a second's anguished regret, then steeled himself, for this is the way it must be.
- 70** Everybody had a machete. In his village, the man who owned a rifle must remain supreme.