

O. Henry Memorial Award Prize Stories of 1921

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The Heart Of Little Shikara

By EDISON MARSHALL

From *Everybody's*

I

If it hadn't been for a purple moon that came peering up above the dark jungle just at nightfall, it would have been impossible to tell that Little Shikara was at his watch. He was really just the colour of the shadows--a rather pleasant brown--he was very little indeed, and besides, he was standing very, very still. If he was trembling at all, from anticipation and excitement, it was no more than Nahar the tiger trembles as he crouches in ambush. But the moon did show him--peering down through the leaf-clusters of the heavy vines--and shone very softly in his wide-open dark eyes.

And it was a purple moon--no other colour that man could name. It looked almost unreal, like a paper moon painted very badly by a clumsy stage-hand. The jungle-moon quite often has that peculiar purplish tint, most travellers know, but few of them indeed ever try to tell what causes it. This particular moon probed down here and there between the tall bamboos, transformed the jungle--just now waking--into a mystery and a fairyland, glinted on a hard-packed elephant trail that wound away into the thickets, and always came back to shine on the coal-black Oriental eyes of the little boy beside the village gate. It showed him standing very straight and just as tall as his small stature would permit, and looked oddly silvery and strange on his long, dark hair. Little Shikara, son of Khoda Dunnoo, was waiting for the return of a certain idol and demigod who was even now riding home in his *howdah* from the tiger hunt.

Other of the villagers would be down to meet Warwick Sahib as soon as they heard the shouts of his beaters--but Little Shikara had been waiting almost an hour. Likely, if they had known about it, they would have commented on his badness, because he was notoriously bad, if indeed--as the villagers told each other--he was not actually cursed with evil spirits.

In the first place, he was almost valueless as a herder of buffalo. Three times, when he had been sent with the other boys to watch the herds in their wallows, he had left his post and crept away into the fringe of jungle on what was unquestionably some mission of witchcraft. For small naked brown boys, as a rule, do not go alone and unarmed into the thick bamboos. Too many things can happen to prevent them ever coming out again; too many brown silent ribbons crawl in the grass, or too many yellow, striped creatures, no less lithe, lurk in the thickets. But the strangest thing of all--and the surest sign of witchcraft--was that he had always come safely out again, yet with never any satisfactory explanations as to why he had gone. He had always looked some way very joyful and tremulous--and perhaps even pale if from the nature of things a brown boy ever can look

pale. But it was the kind of paleness that one has after a particularly exquisite experience. It was not the dumb, teeth-chattering paleness of fear.

"I saw the sergeant of the jungle," Little Shikara said after one of these excursions. And this made no sense at all.

"There are none of the King's soldiers here," the brown village folk replied to him. "Either thou liest to us, or thine eyes lied to thee. And didst thou also see the chevron that told his rank?"

"That was the way I knew him. It was the black bear, and he wore the pale chevron low on his throat."

This was Little Shikara all over. Of course he referred to the black Himalayan bear which all men know wears a yellowish patch, of chevron shape, just in front of his fore legs; but why he should call him a jungle-sergeant was quite beyond the wit of the village folk to say. Their imagination did not run in that direction. It never even occurred to them that Little Shikara might be a born jungle creature, expatriated by the accident of birth--one of that free, strange breed that can never find peace in the villages of men.

"But remember the name we gave him," his mother would say. "Perhaps he is only living up to his name."

For there are certain native hunters in India that are known, far and wide, as the Shikaris; and possibly she meant in her tolerance that her little son was merely a born huntsman. But in reality Little Shikara was not named for these men at all. Rather it was for a certain fleet-winged little hawk, a hunter of sparrows, that is one of the most free spirits in all the jungle.

And it was almost like taking part in some great hunt himself--to be waiting at the gate for the return of Warwick Sahib. Even now, the elephant came striding out of the shadows; and Little Shikara could see the trophy. The hunt had indeed been successful, and the boy's glowing eyes beheld--even in the shadows--the largest, most beautiful tiger-skin he had ever seen. It was the great Nahar, the royal tiger, who had killed one hundred cattle from near-by fields.

Warwick Sahib rode in his *howdah*, and he did not seem to see the village people that came out to meet him. In truth, he seemed half asleep, his muscles limp, his gray eyes full of thoughts. He made no answer to the triumphant shouts of the village folk. Little Shikara glanced once at the lean, bronzed face, the limp, white, thin hands, and something like a shiver of ecstasy went clear to his ten toes. For like many other small boys, all over the broad world, he was a hero-worshipper to the last hair of his head; and this quiet man on the elephant was to him beyond all measure the most wonderful living creature on the earth.

He didn't cry out, as the others did. He simply stood in mute worship, his little body tingling with glory. Warwick Sahib had looked up now, and his slow eyes were sweeping the line of brown faces. But still he did not seem to see them. And then--wonder of wonders--his eyes rested full on the eyes of his little worshipper beside the gate.

But it was quite the way of Warwick Sahib to sweep his gray, tired-out eyes over a scene and seemingly perceive nothing; yet in reality absorbing every detail with the accuracy of a photographic plate. And his seeming indifference was not a pose with him, either. He was just a great sportsman who was also an English gentleman, and he had learned certain lessons of impassiveness from the wild. Only one of the brown faces he beheld was worth a lingering glance. And when he met that one his eyes halted in their sweeping survey--and Warwick Sahib smiled.

That face was the brown, eager visage of Little Shikara. And the blood of the boy flowed to the skin, and he glowed red all over through the brown.

It was only the faintest of quiet, tolerant smiles; but it meant more to him than almost any kind of an honour could have meant to the prematurely gray man in the *howdah*. The latter passed on to his estate, and some of the villagers went back to their women and their thatch huts. But still Little Shikara stood motionless--and it wasn't until the thought suddenly came to him that possibly the beaters had already gathered and were telling the story of the kill that with startling suddenness he raced back through the gates to the village.

Yes, the beaters had assembled in a circle under a tree, and most of the villagers had gathered to hear the story. He slipped in among them, and listened with both outstanding little ears. Warwick Sahib had dismounted from his elephant as usual, the beaters said, and with but one attendant had advanced up the bed of a dry creek. This was quite like Warwick Sahib, and Little Shikara felt himself tingling again. Other hunters, particularly many of the rich sahibs from across the sea, shot their tigers from the security of the *howdah*; but this wasn't Warwick's way of doing. The male tiger had risen snarling from his lair, and had been felled at the first shot.

Most of the villagers had supposed that the story would end at this point. Warwick Sahib's tiger hunts were usually just such simple and expeditious affairs. The gun would lift to his shoulder, the quiet eyes would glance along the barrel--and the tiger, whether charging or standing still--would speedily die. But to-day there had been a curious epilogue. Just as the beaters had started toward the fallen animal, and the white Heaven-born's cigarette-case was open in his hand, Nahara, Nahar's great, tawny mate, had suddenly sprung forth from the bamboo thickets.

She drove straight to the nearest of the beaters. There was no time whatever for Warwick to take aim. His rifle leaped, like a live thing, in his arms, but not one of the horrified beaters had seen his eyes lower to the sights. Yet the bullet went home--they could tell by the way the tiger flashed to her breast in the grass.

Yet she was only wounded. One of the beaters, starting, had permitted a bough of a tree to whip Warwick in the face, and the blow had disturbed what little aim he had. It was almost a miracle that he had hit the great cat at all. At once the thickets had closed around her, and the beaters had been unable to drive her forth again.

The circle was silent thereafter. They seemed to be waiting for Khusru, one of the head men of the village, to give his opinion. He knew more about the wild animals than any mature native in the assembly, and his comments on the hunting stories were usually worth hearing.

"We will not be in the honoured service of the Protector of the Poor at this time a year from now," he said.

They all waited tensely. Shikara shivered. "Speak, Khusru," they urged him.

"Warwick Sahib will go again to the jungles--and Nahara will be waiting. She owes two debts. One is the killing of her mate--and ye know that these two tigers have been long and faithful mates. Do ye think she will let that debt go unpaid? She will also avenge her own wound."

"Perhaps she will die of bleeding," one of the others suggested.

"Nay, or ye would have found her this afternoon. Ye know that it is the wounded tiger that is most to be feared. One day, and he will go forth in pursuit of her again; and then ye will not see him riding back so grandly on his elephant. Perhaps she will come here, to carry away *our* children."

Again Shikara tingled--hoping that Nahara would at least come close enough to cause excitement. And that night, too happy to keep silent, he told his mother of Warwick Sahib's smile. "And some time I--I, thine own son," he said as sleepiness came upon him, "will be a killer of tigers, even as Warwick Sahib."

"Little sparrow-hawk," his mother laughed at him. "Little one of mighty words, only the great sahibs that come from afar, and Warwick Sahib himself, may hunt the tiger, so how canst thou, little worthless?"

"I will soon be grown," he persisted, "and I--I, too--will some time return with such a tiger-skin as the great Heaven-born brought this afternoon." Little Shikara was very sleepy, and he was telling his dreams much more frankly than was his wont. "And the village folk will come out to meet me with shoutings, and I will tell them of the shot--in the circle under the tree."

"And where, little hawk, wilt thou procure thine elephants, and such rupees as are needed?"

"Warwick Sahib shoots from the ground--and so will I. And sometimes he goes forth with only one attendant--and I will not need even one. And who can say--perhaps he will find me even a bolder man than Gunga Singhai; and he will take me in his place on the hunts in the jungles."

For Gunga Singhai was Warwick Sahib's own personal attendant and gun-carrier--the native that the Protector of the Poor could trust in the tightest places. So it was only to be expected that Little Shikara's mother should laugh at him. The idea of her son being an attendant of Warwick Sahib, not to mention a hunter of tigers, was only a tale to tell her husband when the boy's bright eyes were closed in sleep.

"Nay, little man," she told him. "Would I want thee torn to pieces in Nahara's claws? Would I want thee smelling of the jungle again, as thou didst after chasing the water-buck through the bamboos? Nay--thou wilt be a herdsman, like thy father--and perhaps gather many rupees."

But Little Shikara did not want to think of rupees. Even now, as sleep came to him, his childish spirit had left the circle of thatch roofs, and had gone on tremulous expeditions into the jungle. Far away, the trumpet-call of a wild tusker trembled through the moist, hot night; and great bell-shaped flowers made the air pungent and heavy with perfume. A tigress skulked somewhere in a thicket licking an injured leg with her rough tongue, pausing to listen to every sound the night gave forth. Little Shikara whispered in his sleep.

A half mile distant, in his richly furnished bungalow, Warwick Sahib dozed over his after-dinner cigar. He was in evening clothes, and crystal and silver glittered on his board. But his gray eyes were half closed; and the gleam from his plate could not pass the long, dark lashes. For his spirit was far distant, too--on the jungle trails with that of Little Shikara.

II

One sunlit morning, perhaps a month after the skin of Nahar was brought in from the jungle, Warwick Sahib's mail was late. It was an unheard-of thing. Always before, just as the clock struck eight, he would hear the cheerful tinkle of the postman's bells. At first he considered complaining; but as morning drew to early afternoon he began to believe that investigation would be the wiser course.

The postman's route carried him along an old elephant trail through a patch of thick jungle beside one of the tributaries of the Manipur. When natives went out to look, he was neither on the path nor drowned in the creek, nor yet in his thatched hut at the other end of his route. The truth was that this particular postman's bells would never be heard by human ears again. And there was enough evidence in the wet mould of the trail to know what had occurred.

That night the circle under the tree was silent and shivering. "Who is next?" they asked of one another. The jungle night came down, breathless and mysterious, and now and then a twig was cracked by a heavy foot at the edge of the thickets. In Warwick's house, the great Protector of the Poor took his rifles from their cases and fitted them together.

"To-morrow," he told Gunga Singhai, "we will settle for that postman's death." Singhai breathed deeply, but said nothing. Perhaps his dark eyes brightened. The tiger-hunts were nearly as great a delight to him as they were to Warwick himself.

But while Nahara, lame from Warwick's bullet, could no longer overtake cattle, she did with great skilfulness avoid the onrush of the beaters. Again Little Shikara waited at the village gate for his hero to return; but the beaters walked silently to-night. Nor were there any tales to be told under the tree.

Nahara, a fairly respectable cattle-killer before, had become in a single night one of the worst terrors of India. Of course she was still a coward, but she had learned, by virtue of a chance meeting with a postman on a trail after a week of heart-devouring starvation, two or three extremely portentous lessons. One of them was that not even the little deer, drinking beside the Manipur, died half so easily as these tall, forked forms of which she had previously been so afraid. She found out also that they could neither run swiftly nor walk silently, and they could be approached easily even by a tiger that cracked a twig with every step. It simplified the problem of living immensely; and just as any other feline would have done, she took the line of least resistance. If there had been plenty of carrion in the jungle, Nahara might never have hunted men. But the kites and the jackals looked after the carrion; and they were much swifter and keener-eyed than a lame tiger.

She knew enough not to confine herself to one village; and it is rather hard to explain how any lower creature, that obviously cannot reason, could have possessed this knowledge. Perhaps it was because she had learned that a determined hunt, with many beaters and men on elephants, invariably followed her killings. It was always well to travel just as far as possible from the scene. She found out also that, just as a doe is easier felled than a horned buck, certain of this new kind of game were more easily taken than the others. Sometimes children played at the door of their huts, and sometimes old men were afflicted with such maladies that they could not flee at all. All these things Nahara learned; and in learning them she caused a certain civil office of the British Empire to put an exceedingly large price on her head.

Gradually the fact dawned on her that unlike the deer and the buffalo, this new game was more easily hunted in the daylight--particularly in that tired-out, careless twilight hour when the herders and the plantation hands came in from their work. At night the village folk kept in their huts, and such wood-cutters and gipsies as slept without wakened every hour to tend their fires. Nahara was deathly afraid of fire. Night after night she would creep round and round a gipsy camp, her eyes like two pale blue moons in the darkness, and would never dare attack.

And because she was taking her living in a manner forbidden by the laws of the jungle, the glory and beauty of her youth quickly departed from her. There are no prisons for those that break the jungle laws, no courts and no appointed officers, but because these are laws that go down to the roots of life, punishment is always swift and inevitable. "Thou shall not kill men," is the first law of the wild creatures; and everyone knows that any animal or breed of animals that breaks this law has sooner or later been hunted down and slain--just like any other murderer. The mange came upon her, and she lost flesh, and certain of her teeth began to come out. She was no longer the beautiful female of her species, to be sung to by the weaver-birds as she passed beneath. She was a hag and a vampire, hatred of whom lay deep in every human heart in her hunting range.

Often the hunting was poor, and sometimes she went many days in a stretch without making a single kill. And in all beasts, high and low, this is the last step to the worst degeneracy of all. It instils a curious, terrible kind of blood-lust--to kill, not once, but as many times as possible in the same hunt; to be content not with one death, but to slay and slay until the whole herd is destroyed. It is the instinct that makes a little weasel kill all the chickens in a coop, when one was all it could possibly carry away, and that will cause a wolf to leap from sheep to sheep in a fold until every one is dead. Nahara didn't get a chance to kill every day; so when the opportunity did come, like a certain pitiable kind of human hunter who comes from afar to hunt small game, she killed as many times as she could in quick succession. And the British Empire raised the price on her head.

One afternoon found her within a half mile of Warwick's bungalow, and for five days she had gone without food. One would not have thought of her as a royal tigress, the queen of the felines and one of the most beautiful of all living things. And since she was still tawny and graceful, it would be hard to understand why she no longer gave the impression of beauty. It was simply gone, as a flame goes, and her queenliness was wholly departed, too. In some vague way she had become a poisonous, a ghastly thing, to be named with such outcasts as the jackals or hyenas.

Excessive hunger, in most of the flesh-eating animals, is really a first cousin to madness. It brings bad dreams and visions, and, worst of all, it induces an insubordination to all the forest laws of man and beast. A well-fed wolf-pack will run in stark panic from a human being; but even the wisest of mountaineers do not care to meet the same gray band in the starving times of winter. Starvation brings recklessness, a desperate frenzied courage that is likely to upset all of one's preconceived notions as to the behaviour of animals. It also brings, so that all men may be aware of its presence, a peculiar lurid glow to the balls of the eyes.

In fact, the two pale circles of fire were the most noticeable characteristics of the long, tawny cat that crept through the bamboos. Except for them, she would hardly have been discernible at all. The yellow grass made a perfect background, her black stripes looked like the streaks of shadow between the stalks of bamboo, and for one that is lame she crept with an astounding silence. One couldn't have believed that such a great creature could lie so close to the earth and be so utterly invisible in the low thickets.

A little peninsula of dwarf bamboos and tall jungle grass extended out into the pasture before the village and Nahara crept out clear to its point. She didn't seem to be moving. One couldn't catch the stir and draw of muscles. And yet she slowly glided to the end; then began her wait. Her head sunk low, her body grew tense, her tail whipped softly back and forth, with as easy a motion as the swaying of a serpent. The light flamed and died and flamed and died again in her pale eyes.

Soon a villager who had been working in Warwick's fields came trotting in Oriental fashion across the meadow. His eyes were only human, and he did not see the tawny shape in the tall grass. If any one had told him that a full-grown tigress could have crept to such a place and still remained invisible, he would have laughed. He was going to his thatched hut, to brown wife and babies, and it was no wonder that he trotted swiftly. The muscles of the great cat bunched, and now the whipping tail began to have a little vertical motion that is the final warning of a spring.

The man was already in leaping range; but the tiger had learned, in many experiences, always to make sure. Still she crouched--a single instant in which the trotting native came two paces nearer. Then the man drew up with a gasp of fright.

For just as the clear outlines of an object that has long been concealed in a maze of light and shadow will often leap, with sudden vividness, to the eyes, the native suddenly perceived the tiger.

He caught the whole dread picture--the crouching form, the terrible blue lights of the eyes, the whipping tail. The gasp he uttered from his closing throat seemed to act like the fall of a firing-pin against a shell on the bunched muscles of the animal; and she left her covert in a streak of tawny light.

But Nahara's leaps had never been quite accurate since she had been wounded by Warwick's bullet, months before. They were usually straight enough for the general purposes of hunting, but they missed by a long way the "theoretical centre of impact" of which artillery officers speak. Her lame paw always seemed to disturb her balance. By remembering it, she could usually partly overcome the disadvantage; but to-day, in the madness of her hunger, she had been unable to remember anything except the terrible rapture of killing. This circumstance alone, however, would not have saved the native's life. Even though her fangs missed his throat, the power of the blow and her rending talons would have certainly snatched away his life as a storm snatches a leaf. But there was one other determining factor. The Burman had seen the tiger just before she leaped; and although there had been no time for conscious thought, his guardian reflexes had flung him to one side in a single frenzied effort to miss the full force of the spring.

The result of both these things was that he received only an awkward, sprawling blow from the animal's shoulder. Of course he was hurled to the ground; for no human body in the world is built to withstand the ton or so of shocking power of a three-hundred-pound cat leaping through the air. The tigress sprawled down also, and because she lighted on her wounded paw, she squealed with pain. It was possibly three seconds before she had

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