

GIANT STOPPERS!



A deep roar accompanied the yellow streak as the wounded tiger reached the elephant's head in a single bound. The *mahout* screamed as a single swipe from the great claws tore three ribs away from his chest. The shikar elephant went mad with terror and pain as the striped monster tore at his head. In the midst of this mayhem an extremely experienced hunter could only cling to the inside of his *howdah* because the ride on what had become a 4-ton bucking "bronc" made using his double rifle totally impossible. If the tiger didn't kill him, the terrified, runaway elephant would. The last line of defense was in a boot-like holster on the inside of the wicker *howdah*. At the moment the tiger scrambled over the edge of the *howdah* the hunter thumbed the hammers and fired the right barrel. More than a quarter ton of cat was crushed and literally swallowed by the smoke and roar. The Victorian hunter had just unleashed nearly 90 grains of powder and 1¼ ounces of lead, flattening the tiger...with a *handgun*.

This is about giants. Not defensive linemen who could carry a normal man like he was a rag doll or 4-wheel-drive trucks

These "ultimate" combat handguns throw huge chunks of lead that can stop man or beast in a heartbeat.
By Ross Seyfried

that can run over a Volkswagen and only suffer a clicking noise in their tires. Instead this is about handguns, huge handguns, ones that could use a 9mm cartridge for a primer.

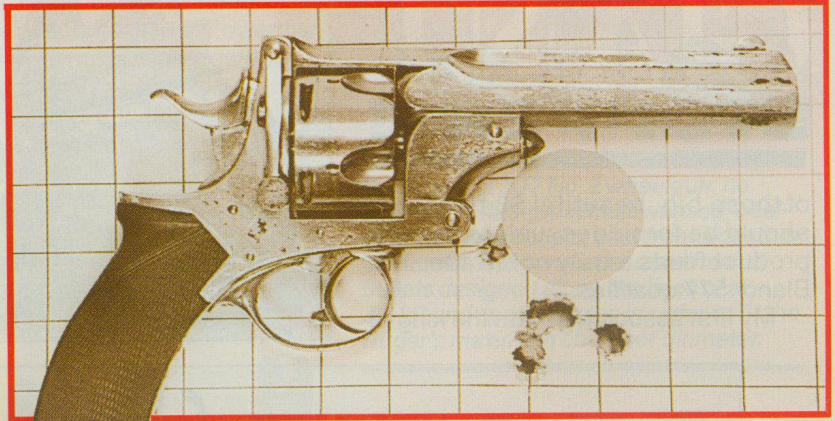
While defensive linemen and Big-Foot trucks are part of modern times, the late 1800s saw handguns of similar stature. These were not toys, but tools of immense purpose designed purely to save a man's life. They were born of a time when a "gunfight" was a probability,

rather than a possibility. The battle may have been against an army of Matebele tribesmen or an enraged tiger, but the bottom line was the same; when the defender pulled the trigger something decisive had better happen or he would die. They did not spray little bullets about...hoping for success. Instead they heaved huge chunks of lead, *stopping* man or beast as was required. Two kinds of handgun-giants existed. They were the family known as "howdah" pistols and the king of revolvers, the .577.

Toward the end of the 19th century was the time when the sun never set on the British Empire. To get and maintain a hold on much of this land required almost daily battles with some of



The author (above) wields his .577 Thomas Bland revolver and a 16-gauge J.D. Doughall double-barreled Howdah pistol. Both of these guns are shown on the opposite page, along with their respective cartridges. These handguns date to the late 19th century—the Golden Age of Giant Stoppers!



Seyfried's .577 Thomas Bland five-shot revolver is quite accurate, as this five-shot group printed at 15 yards attests. Top-break big-bore revolvers such as the Bland and others were used across the British Empire during the 19th century as the "ultimate" combat handguns, as the vintage woodcut at right illustrates.



the fiercest warriors in history. They fought for places like Afghanistan, Sudan, Somalia and Zululand, where a great deal of the conflicts were close, hand-to-hand combat. At the beginning of the breech-loading era the British soldier had single-shot Snider or Martini rifles. The officers, in particular, were armed with revolvers. Initially these were .450 Adams. They used 13 grains of black powder and 225-grain bullets (compared to the .45 Colt with 40 grains of powder and 255 grains of lead). Like our .38 Long Colt used in the Philippines, they failed miserably. The officers demanded results and the British gunmakers responded with handguns of a

size and stopping capability that has never been equaled.

Before I get to specifics, a word about legality is in order. The provisions of our firearm laws make exception for sporting rifles with bores greater than 1/2 inch. That is why things like modern .600 Nitros are treated the same as any other firearm. They do not grant such exceptions for handguns. A modern ultra-large-bore handgun is treated the same as a machine gun or destructive device, as a class III weapon subject to the strict ownership requirements and the \$200 transfer stamp. However, arms made before 1898 (with some other qualifications) are considered

antiques and thus the gargantuan pieces you are about to read about do not require the special class III treatment. Just why the law discriminates against bore size I cannot say. It certainly is not logic. A pistol throwing a 1-inch ball probably poses less threat to society than a .22. I suspect these regulations fit into the same archaic realm as those that make it illegal to kiss your lady in public—yes, some of those are still on the books. Once upon a time someone thought he was doing the country a favor by making a big gun illegal. Getting firearms laws undone is not a likely legality.

True big-bore revolvers were developed in several sizes including .450, .476 and .500, but all paled into insignificance when compared to the .577. These began as six-shot Tranters, which had a terrible handicap. They had a secondary plate that covered the heads of the cartridges in the cylinder. The plate and cylinder had to be removed and replaced to empty and reload. With many spears and long, curved swords in your face this very complicated reload lost its charm immediately. The Tranter was quickly replaced with five-shot revolvers usually of the Webley-Pryse patent. These were top-break double actions that automatically ejected the empties when the gun was opened. The original brass cartridges were balloon head, loaded with 28 grains of FFFg equivalent powder and a 450-grain bullet. The cartridge case is like the .577 Nitro, cut to .800 inch long. In fact this is how I make cases for my Bland revolver. Cutting off one

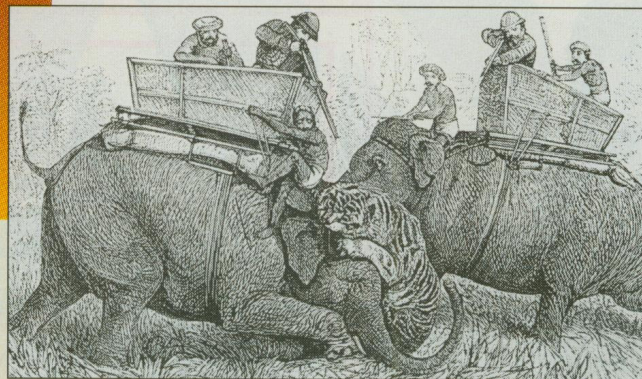


Today's "stoppers" versus yesterday's. The 450-grain bullet load for the .577 Bland revolver is compared to a 9mm Luger, while the big 16-gauge Howdah pistol loaded with a 535-grain round ball towers over the current .40 S&W.

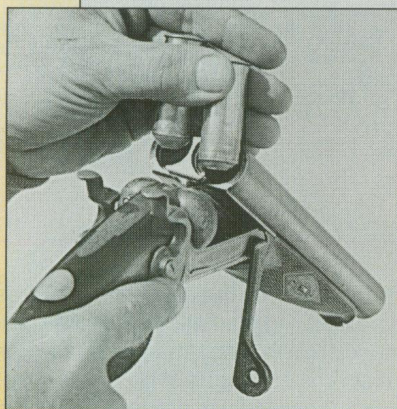
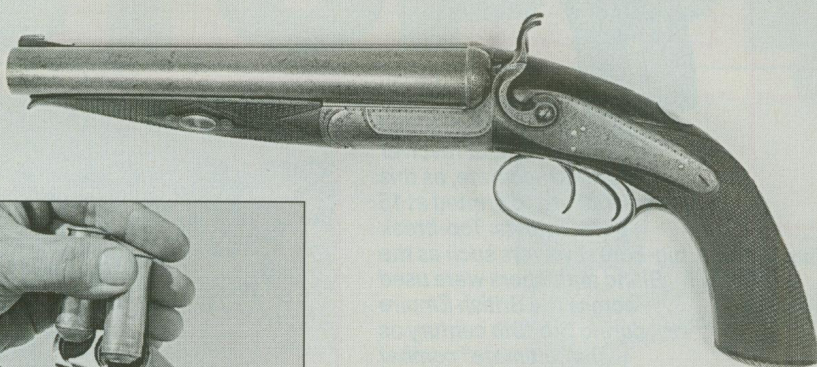
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of those big, beautiful \$3 treasures should be forbidden, unless the end product feeds a truly noble arm. The Bland .577 qualifies.

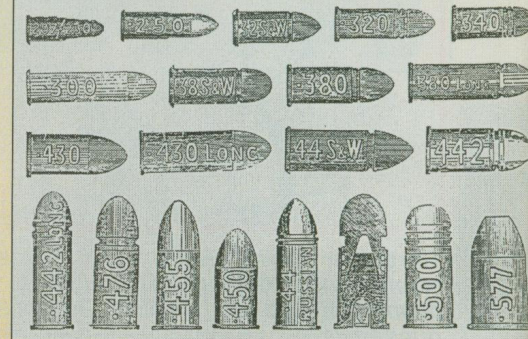
My first association with the king of



In this rare 1860s woodcut entitled "An Ugly Customer," the hunters are using rifles to kill this tiger as he mauls one of their Shikar elephants. Normally a more easily handled Howdah pistol would have been the weapon of choice in this precarious situation.



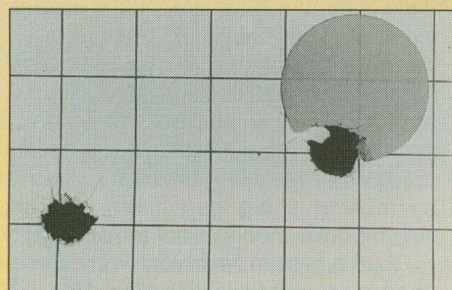
These photos show a 16-gauge Howdah pistol by British gunmaker, J.D. Doughall. Interestingly, this pistol is made on the same action that would have been used for many express double rifle calibers. As the inset photo shows, the double-barreled pistol is loaded by breaking at the breech, via the side lever.



This page from an early Eley catalog, circa 1870s, shows a selection of ammunition for revolvers of that period, including the .577 round. Of course, these were all black-powder loadings at that time.

what would go through the mind of the unfortunate criminal who had the opportunity to stare at the business end.

The double action, with its long, flat mainspring, was silky smooth and the single-action let-off was crisp at about 4 pounds. I pressed the twin locking levers on either side of the hammer, tilted the barrel down and dropped in five rounds. I had just loaded a cylinder with nearly 1/3 pound of lead! The cartridges are almost comical in appearance. They are nearly as wide as they are long. I

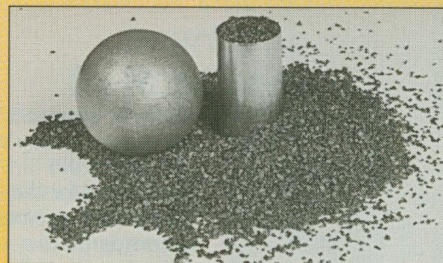


This target was fired from 15 yards with both barrels from the author's vintage J.D. Doughall 16-gauge Howdah pistol. This is excellent accuracy, especially when one considers that the normal range these guns would be used at would be around 5 yards or less.

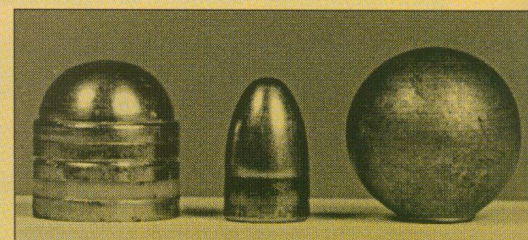
all revolvers came aptly in the English countryside. My friend Giles Whittome offered me what I felt was the ultimate honor and treat for a handgunner: not only did I get to hold his magnificent, fully engraved and nickel-plated Bland presentation .577, he let me fire it.

The revolver wasn't huge. It scaled 3 pounds with a 5-inch barrel and in overall stature it was only slightly larger than an S&W Model 29. But...the frontal view was like staring at the mouth of a whale. Its bore is .614 inch, with cylinder throats to accommodate the bullets.

With a frame and barrel that are only .710 inch wide and a 2.1-inch cylinder you can see almost all of the four chambers that aren't behind the bore. And with its giant maw you can see all the way to the firing pin, or nose of the bullet, right down its rifled tube. There is a lot more "hole" than donut. Even in a primitive land an enemy who had any idea of what this "fire-stick" was supposed to do would surely consider surrendering rather than facing this monster front on. Today, I chuckle heartily at



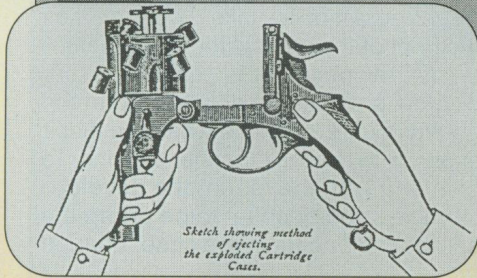
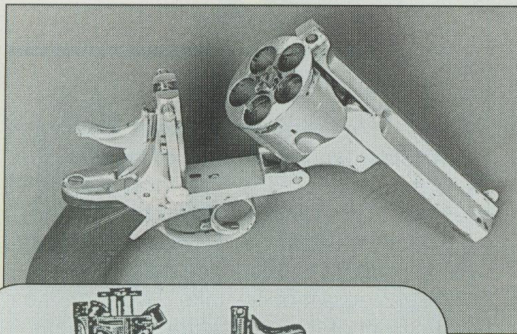
The 16-gauge, double-barreled Howdah pistol's 3-dram black-powder charge is shown here with the 535-grain ball and a 9mm casing. This load produces a muzzle velocity of around 900 fps. As you can see, the 9mm brass is full and stands in the remainder of the Howdah's charge that wouldn't fit in the 9's case.



For size comparison, a 450-grain, .614-inch bullet, which is used in the .577-caliber revolver, and a 535-grain, .710-inch, 16-gauge ball flank a 155-grain 9mm bullet.

closed the action and aligned the sights. They are fixed, a rear V that is cut into the topstrap and a front like on a Colt Single Action. I centered a target that we had been using for some rifle shooting, 70 yards downrange.

I wasn't sure what to expect, but ballistically the .577 was about two .45 au-



Above: This 19th-century, English-made Thomas Bland five-shot revolver utilizes a double-action, top-break design. **Below:** British arms dealers like C.G. Bonehill advertised mammoth-bored "five-shooters" like this Webley-Pryse patent revolver as being a "most useful weapon for India, The Cape and for general foreign service."

tos. Eley specified the 450-grain bullets at 745 fps (feet per second)—the same bullet weight but only about two-thirds the speed of the big .500 Linebaugh. The recoil was big, but not at all violent.



These photos show that the .44 Magnum S&W Model 629 (top) is about the same manageable size as the Bland .577 revolver. The real difference is in the bore and cylinder diameters.

The hollow boom of the black powder, with its cloud of smoke, make firing the .577 something I can only describe to handgunners as euphoric. I greedily emptied the cylinder and didn't offer to share with any other onlookers. It was doubtful that I would ever have another chance! I shouldn't have been amazed, but I was when I looked at the target. All

five rounds were centered; I could cover them with my hand! This hand-made leviathan of Edwardian times was more than powerful, it was extremely accurate.

As it turns out, this wouldn't be my last chance to fire a .577. One day a glass case full of vintage Colts, S&Ws and other non-descript guns held the ultimate treasure. Buried below the ordinary, was a nickel Thomas Bland .577,

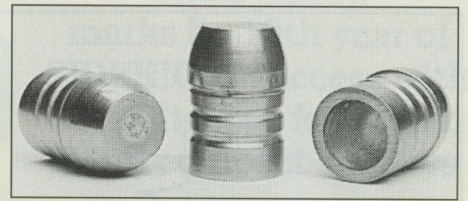


Shown with a selection of modern cartridges, you can see the relative size of the .577 round. Cartridges shown are, left to right: .22 Long Rifle; .38 Special; .44 Remington Magnum; .577 handload using custom, 1.4-inch Red Willow Armory brass case.

exactly like Giles' without the engraving. Its owner knew its value, and I couldn't afford it. But like many gun dealers this fellow was a trader. I returned with my car's trunk full of guns and heaped them on his table until my pile "outweighed" the Bland. To give you an idea, my side of the swap included one double rifle. I made a set of dies, sacrificed 50 .577 Nitro cases and turned a big blunt-nosed bullet mold. Now, whenever I feel I deserve a treat—a walk back in time and the feel of pure luxury in my hands—I unleash this Goliath-stopper.

In terms of pure performance—stopping the enemy—this true combat handgun probably has never had a peer. It is far less powerful than the modern .475s and .500s, but that heavy, pure-lead bullet with the great diameter gives it a "slap" that no other has known. On the Taylor scale the .577 measures 29 while the .45 auto measures 12 and the 9mm puts forth a pathetic 7. If I knew I had to stop an adversary I would gladly choose a single round from my Bland over all 15 from a "wonder-nine." The choice is equivalent to the choice between a pick handle and a chopstick.

My good friend and gunmaker extraordinaire, Hamilton Bowen, is as badly diseased by the romance of ancient guns as I am. He views the .577 revolvers with great reverence, as a symbol of glorious times and men gone by. Hamilton not only has the mentality to understand them, but the skill to create one. This, the great master of the handgun, turned a Ruger Redhawk into the equivalent of my Bland.



For Bowen's .577 No. 2 wheelgun, he uses these 425-grain hollowbased, heel-type, flatnose bullets, cast from a custom LBT mold. The gunmaker used heeled bullets designed along the lines of a .22 LR and special cases in order to fit the Ruger's maximum chamber diameter.

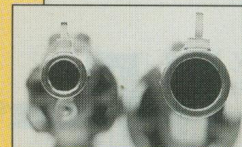
The conversion uses a Labounty barrel and Hamilton's five-shot cylinder to make what appears to be a giant model 10 Smith & Wesson. Far from what appears to be a nuts-and-bolts conversion, the time, effort and skill needed to create the masterpiece was horrendous. The Labounty

Because of the size of these .577 rounds, Bowen's creation, like the 19th-century revolvers, employed five-shot cylinders.



barrel alone required a special one-of-a-kind rifling head and a year's wait to produce. While the whole project may seem ridiculous, the explanation is simple: Hamilton made a gun for himself. The cost in parts and modest hourly wages is about \$7,500. For those with a burning desire and deep pockets it could be done again.

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Gunmaker Hamilton Bowen created his own .577 DA revolver by starting with a Ruger Redhawk revolver, then using a Labounty barrel and Bowen's own five-shot cylinder. Dubbed the .577 No. 2, this modern-day equivalent of Seyfried's 19th-century .577 Bland is shown here with an S&W M&P in .38 Special. Inset shows difference in bore sizes.

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The maximum cylinder diameter would not allow the use of regular .577 cases or the giant .614-inch-diameter bore of the Bland. Instead he created a special case, 1.4 inches long, turned by Red Willow. It uses a heeled .577-diameter, 425-grain bullet. Like .22 Long Rifles the front of the bullet is the same diameter as the outside of the case. The rear portion is smaller in diameter than the front and utilizes a hollow base so that it expands to groove diameter on firing. To go along with the rest of the development, a special collet-type crimp die crimps the bullets in the case. Loaded

"...when the defender pulled the trigger something decisive had better happen or he would die."

with 35 grains of FFFg, it duplicates the original .577 ballistics. Like the vintage super-giants the new Bowen "thumper" is extremely accurate. This gun carries those Title II restrictions that I spoke about, details that to my chagrin have kept me from being able to shoot it. Hopefully one day I will be able to travel to Tennessee and try this end-all security blanket.

Beyond the revolvers there were even bigger handguns. These are generically known as Howdah pistols. A Howdah is the box-like saddle that was used atop a shikar (hunting) elephant, in India and adjacent lands. In its finest definition the Howdah pistol was a sporting arm, used quite literally to scrape tigers off your elephant. It can be imagined that when 500 pounds of enraged Bengal tiger wanted to get in the "saddle" with you, something short, quick, handy, reliable and immensely powerful would be wanted.

The answer was a double-barreled pistol. Unlike the revolvers that were a short-lived product of the breech-loading era, the Howdahs had a long family tree. The huge-bored pistol began as flinters or even earlier. Usually single-barreled at first, the 20, 16 or even 12-gauge, "horse-sea-tower-howdah" pistols have been around a long time. The epitome are the double Howdahs and the most glorious of all are Lancasters with four barrels. A double barrel on top of a double barrel. I have not been lucky enough to see one of these, so we will be content to study the most common dual-barreled kind.

Against man or beast they had the

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same attributes as a double rifle; most important were reliability and power. Like the double rifle, they were two guns at once: two barrels, two locks and two triggers. When faced with life and death, and this is about the only time they were used, nothing could equate with these monster handguns. The puppies were .500s, while the largest I know of was a massive 4½-pound 12 gauge made by Alex Henry, owned by former *Guns & Ammo* editor Howard French (see *Guns & Ammo Annual 1972*).

These are not sawed-off shotguns or a chop job on some other long arm. Instead, they are pure handguns, built on the finest actions used in double rifles. While smooth-bore versions exist, most are fully rifled. Some were plain-finished workman-like pieces, while probably an equal number were "best quality." My J.D. Doughall 16-bore has two little stamps in secret places marking it both "best" and "highest." It is complete with finest damascus barrels and fine scroll engraving. Also, like many others it was originally fitted with a detachable shoulder stock, which is now sadly missing, that converted it to a carbine. The Doughall "Lockfast" action is a masterful work in itself. The side lever rotates a cam that serves as the hinge pin. The barrels move forward ¼ inch before they drop down. The breech face has two circular disks that fit into chamber recesses behind the cartridge

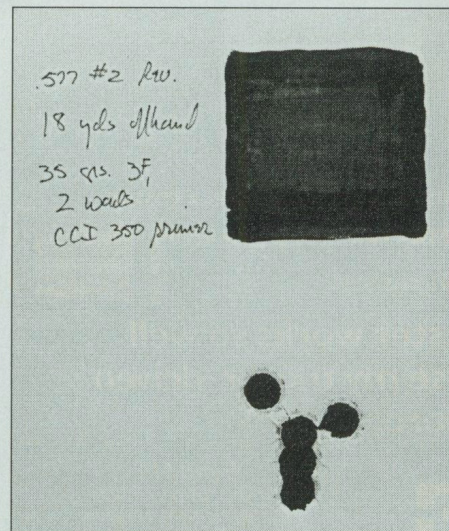
"When faced with life and death...nothing could equate with these monster handguns."

head. This Lockfast has camming action and locking strength that approach that of a bolt action.

Probably the most common Howdah chambering was the .577 Snider cartridge, making the Howdahs a companion arm to the rifles of the day. With 70 grains of powder and 480-grain bullets, they were formidable pieces. However, they were small fry compared to the "gauge" guns. My Doughall is chambered for a 1.8-inch thin brass 16-gauge case. It uses .710-inch round balls and I would expect also the high explosive detonating shells of the era. These were hollow bullets filled with black powder or pure priming compound, designed to detonate once inside a beast. Using a 2-dram powder charge (27.5 grains per dram) it drives the 535-grain balls 725 feet per

second. With a load of 3 drams the big ball roars out at 900 fps. At that level the 3½-pound pistol torques and recoils rather violently, with 66 foot-pounds of recoil compared to 18 from a .44 Magnum. It justifies its recoil with equally impressive power on the front end. The big ball delivers a 48 on the Taylor Knock Out scale...remember the 9mm with 7! Howard French's 12-bore used a 650-grain ball at 800 fps.

The Howdahs were certainly designed for fights at tooth-and-claw



Working with a load of 35 grains of FFFg black powder, two wads, a 425-grain cast lead bullet and CCI's 350 magnum pistol primer, Bowen's handgun scored this tight five-shot group offhand at 18 yards.

range, but I find my Doughall is very reasonably regulated and highly accurate. Its sights are the simplest form, a front bead and a simple platinum line on the standing breech. But even with these "primitive" sights I can hit exactly what I am aiming at in a hurry. At 15 yards the left and right are usually about 4 inches apart, but either barrel will double its shots on demand. Quite possibly a little load development and wadding adjustment would bring the barrels even closer together. I'm certainly not lucky enough to have a tiger try to eat my elephant, but some day a nasty old boar in the thick brush will certainly come up short when he meets my Howdah face on.

Yes, they are dinosaurs, but ones that once served the most noble purpose. They were the extension of a man's hand that would save his life. They probably have little practical value today except in the enjoyment they give us for just knowing that they exist—unless we might take a lesson from them, leaning toward staking our hides on one mighty, well-placed blow, instead of a long magazine full of wonder-nines and dream-tens sprayed about on thin threads of hope.