

Swordsman's Hazard

By DURIS DEJONG

IT all began because of a scene in the motion-picture "Lives of a Bengal Lancer," in which British officers in northern India, armed with spears, and mounted on swift horses, hunt wild boars. My friends Hal and John agreed that this kind of hunting couldn't offer many thrills, because there didn't seem to be the slightest element of danger.

I remarked that it would be good sport to hunt boars with a sword. There would be some risk attached to it, of course; but, I argued, if toreadors without any knowledge of fencing and good footwork can kill a one-ton bull with a sword, why couldn't I, a good fencer, kill a much smaller animal with my trusted *épée*?

They agreed that they couldn't see any reason why not. We are fencers, all three of us: Hal Corbin was a member of the 1932 American Olympic Fencing Team; John Ely is the present Pacific Coast saber champion; and I have represented my native country, Holland, in the 1928 and 1932 Olympic Games, and have held the Pacific Coast three-weapon championship for the past three years.

So we decided to go after wild boar, and give me a chance to kill one with my sword. We were told that the island of Santa Cruz, some twenty miles off the coast halfway between Los Angeles and Santa Barbara, was full of them.

People who had been to the island to kill wild boars, tried to impress us with the danger of facing a charging boar with anything less effective than a heavy rifle. We only laughed at them: Weren't we fencers, quick of hand and faster on our feet than they? Couldn't we, trained as we were, easily vault clear over the animal when it charged?

We had to take firearms, however, as the animals won't charge, or even come out in the open unless provoked. John, who is a good shot with a revolver, planned to take his .38. Hal, the stolid, the unimaginative, the conservative, said he was going to take his big 7mm. Lebel rifle, just in case—despite our jeers,



A champion fencer tackles a wild boar with his sword.

So one morning at daybreak, we set out in Hal's twenty-seven-foot sloop with auxiliary motor. The weather was all right in the morning, but shortly after noon the water became rougher and rougher. For hours we wallowed in the trough, but our little motor kept on chugging away until we got within protection of the island, and at sundown we landed.

The island of Santa Cruz is one of the most beautiful spots along the Pacific Coast. It is owned by the Caire family of San Francisco. With the exception of the farm-site, which forms a little self-contained village in the wilderness, and some fishing camps here and there along the coast, it is uninhabited and wild. The island is some thirty miles in length—quite mountainous, with Mount Diablo, fifteen hundred feet high, in the middle, and two small rivers. It is overrun with wild boars, small foxes, and numerous kinds of peculiar birds. The Caire farmhouse has its vegetable gardens, fruit trees, cattle, horses, dogs; great herds of sheep, hundreds of thousands of them, wild sheep that leap from rock to rock like mountain goats, herded by Indian shepherds, roam the island, and seem to be on friendly terms with the wild boars.

We slept the sleep of exhaustion that night, after our battle with the waves and the wind, under the great pine trees that grow right up to the stony beach. The next morning one of the watch-dogs of the farm woke us by licking us; after breakfast we went up to the farmhouse for hunting licenses, and for information about the best spots for hunting boars.

Just as the Santa Cruz wild sheep are different from the domestic docile underdone-mutton-chops, the wild pigs are entirely different from the animals to which we are accustomed. The boars are the descendants of a number of ordinary pigs put down on the island some two hundred years ago by some pirate ship as an easily accessible meat supply. The

pigs soon ran wild; their characteristics changed through the generations. They became wild, lean, fast and dangerous. Full-grown boars may be anywhere from a hundred to four hundred and fifty pounds in weight—vicious beasts, with a tough black hide, fairly long legs, thick bones, stringy muscles, a huge, ferocious-looking head with murderous tusks, and almost impossible to kill!

The next morning before dawn we set out on our hunt. John's .38 was swinging low in his holster; Hal was lugging his heavy artillery; I was armed with my light dueling sword, for which I had selected an extra stiff blade, which at the base, close to the bell, was as thick around as a fountain-pen. In my belt was a .32 automatic, should the sword break on the thick skull of some charging boar.

We began to climb in the dark, stumbling over loose rocks, guided by Hal's flashlight, working our way through bushes and around cactus beds. The sunrise on that mountain-side was a magnificent spectacle; then as we resumed our climb, suddenly we topped in our tracks: we had heard the unmistakable grunting of a pig, feeding not far from us. Since at that moment we were more or less hanging on with our teeth and fingernails, Hal using the big rifle as an alpenstock, we didn't particularly relish the thought of a hand-to-hand encounter with an infuriated four-hundred-pound wild boar. Looking inquiringly at each other, we shook our heads, ignored the grunts, and kept climbing. That moment I first realized the foolishness of our undertaking; true, in the gymnasium of the Los Angeles Athletic Club, I could easily have jumped over a charging boar—but here I was to meet him on his own ground. There was no question of jumping lightly, of using footwork; it was all I could do to keep from sliding down the mountain-side.

It was broad daylight when we arrived on a gentler slope, which leads to

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the rolling plateau where the boars feed on wild oats that grow there. It was a perfect morning—but I would have enjoyed it more if my fear of being laughed at by my friends had not prevented me from backing out at the last moment.

SUDDENLY John stopped, and peered in the direction of a cluster of small, misshapen trees that looked like petrified hobgoblins in the white morning light. I too saw some black shape. Hal looked through his field glasses and nodded. John drew his .38, aimed carefully, and fired. A few moments later we knew what a charging boar looks like! He came tearing down the slope with the speed of a running dog, head low like a rhinoceros, uttering shrill, squealing grunts. John and Hal jumped to one side, as arranged, to give me first chance with my *épée*. Instinctively I stood "on guard" as before a fencing bout, knees well bent, the blade level, the sharp point aimed at the ferocious huge head.

Like a flash I realized that I'd never hit a vital spot this way: if I hit his head, the blade would most likely break on the skull without doing any damage. I had no time for looking for a better spot to hit, so I put all my strength in one tremendous leap and jumped to one side. The charging boar missed my thigh by about eight inches. A rhinoceros is said to keep on going after he charges and misses, and a bull closes his eyes as he charges; but this boar whirled as if on a dime and was almost on top of me before I realized it. This time, however, I stood higher than he, and I lunged. The sharp point entered behind the shoulder and penetrated deep into the body without stopping the boar's rush—and the *épée* broke off as he kept on coming!

Dropping the useless hilt, I drew my .32 automatic and fired three shots into his body before he reached me—but it did not stop him. He hit my thigh a frightful blow, and over I went, tripping over a boulder, as I landed flat on my back in the bushes. The boar was immediately after me again, squealing with rage, about to lay me open with his murderous tusks. In that infinitesimal fraction of a second I saw the anxious faces of my friends behind the animal's ferocious head, aiming their guns but not daring to shoot for fear of hitting me.

Like a snake I wiggled to one side and pulled up my legs, ready to kick his ugly snout with my heavy boots and thereby hold the vicious tusks away from my

body a little longer. I even fired two more shots into his body, but then he was on top of me. His tusks gashed my kicking leg from ankle to knee, tearing the leather as if it were rayon. The force of the next kick rolled me off the little ledge on which I was lying, and for a moment I was clear. That was the chance Hal and John had been waiting for: John's .38 banged three, four times, without stopping the boar for a moment; just as he was about to charge me again, I heard the heavy boom of Hal's rifle.

Then the boar was on top of me—I felt my leg double up and heard it snap as his full weight fell on me. The boar lay motionless, quite dead. Afterward I was told that Hal and John had found that all the bullets had landed, John's .38's, my five .32's; but none of the bullets had stopped the animal. The steel point from my broken sword had penetrated over six inches without hurting him. But it was the long 7 mm. bullet from Hal's big rifle that had torn through the boar and killed him on the spot!

So there we were, all the excitement over, about a thousand feet up. My clothes were torn, my leg lacerated and broken, while I was bleeding from many other places. I was sore all over; and my friends didn't dare move me without a stretcher because my broken leg dangled at a queer angle when I tried to move with their assistance. So John slid down the mountain-side to the ranch house for help. After I fainted two or three times from the pain of the rough going, they finally got me down—I don't know how. One of the old Indian farmhands set my leg while I was unconscious—or probably I'd never have let him do it. But my doctor said afterward that the X-ray pictures showed a perfect job.

RETURNING in Hal's sloop was of course impossible, so I had to wait until the next sailing of the *Santa Cruz*, the cattle boat which also belongs to the Caire family. A few days later the boat took a load of sheep into Santa Barbara—and had a mighty sick ex-wild-boar-hunter on board too.

And although I did accomplish what I'd set out to do, hunt a wild boar with a sword, I heartily agree with everybody that I was one darned fool! One thing is certain: I'll do my future hunting in the conventional way—and if men of experience tell me to use a machine-gun, and sit on top of an elephant—I'll follow their advice!