

REVIEWS OF BOOKS.

OUR TROPICAL POSSESSIONS. By J. CAMERON. *Smith, Elder, and Co., Cornhill.*—This volume contains a very interesting description of our colonial possessions in Malayan India. Mr. Cameron says:—"In point of physical beauty it can have few compeers; its chief port ranks third in the commerce of India; and its geographical position gives it a political importance which must be measured by the value to Great Britain of ascendancy through the rapidly-developing countries of the far East." There is one great drawback, however, to a residence in this Oriental paradise, and that is the presence of very dangerous interlopers from a neighbouring island—tigers. Albeit the population of Singapore is very limited, its number is further decreased daily by one individual being carried off and crunched to pieces in the jaws of a tiger.

DEATH BY TIGERS.

The men most exposed to danger are those who work on the gambier and pepper plantations close to the wall of jungle which surrounds them. These are not independent labourers, but either the hired or half-hired and half-purchased servants of the planter, who is forced from time to time into the labour market to replace the men whose agreements or whose terms of servitude are up. It is his interest to obtain these new hands as cheaply as possible, and, that he may do so, it is obviously desirable that his plantation should bear a reputation for safety as well as for good treatment. The notoriety of the island for tigers has spread far and wide, and one of the first inquiries made by new arrivals, as well as by those some time in the country, is as to the freedom of the locality from these monsters. If, therefore, a labourer on a plantation should be carried away by a tiger, it is only reasonable to imagine that the proprietor will do all in his power, first to ignore the fact, and if this be impossible, then to conceal it. That a very extensive system of concealment is in this way practised was, not long ago, made tolerably apparent, not certainly by direct evidence, but in a manner perfectly convincing to those at all acquainted with the habits of the people. About a year ago, when the reported cases of deaths by tigers had reached a very low ebb, it was found on examination that nearly all the victims who had suffered were woodcutters—men who are under no masters, but wander about the jungles collecting firewood where they can get it best to sell in town. Scarcely a gambier or pepper planter appeared to have lost a man, yet in numbers the labourers on the plantations were as a hundred to one of the woodcutters, and they were exposed to equal danger. Inquiries were made, and then it was well ascertained that concealment had been systematically pursued by nearly every one of the jungle planters, and that of the little graves which lay around each homestead nearly one-half were filled by the remains of such as had been killed by tigers. But though there can be no gainsaying the fact that these deaths form a serious item in the year's mortality, the statement that a man falls each day a victim is apt to carry with it a very erroneous impression as to the number of tigers actually in the island. One not unnaturally jumps at once to the conclusion that Singapore must be thickly infested with them, whereas I believe that there are not now more than twenty couples, if so many; and probably at no time previously have they been so numerous; in proof of which I may mention that the Government has all along held out a reward of fifty dollars per head, and latterly, as the evil grew worse, extended it to one hundred dollars, with another fifty dollars from the merchants' fund, for any tiger captured or slain, and yet during the last four years there have only been ten cases where the reward was claimed, and this though a body of convicts are detailed for the purpose, and though, if the vicinity of a tiger in any locality was known for certain, there are not wanting those of the community who would gladly lie in wait every night in the week for the chance of a shot. For many years after its settlement there were no tigers on the island—at least none were ever seen, and the Malays make no mention of their appearance antecedent to that. It was not till 1835 that their presence first became known. Mr. Coleman, the surveyor of the station, accompanied by a body of convicts, was in that year laying out a new road through a low swampy part of the jungle about four miles from town. He was in the act of taking an observation through his theodolite when a crashing sound was heard among the bushes close by, and a huge tiger leaped right into the thick of the party, but fortunately alighted on the theodolite, which was overturned and broken, and, doubtless alarmed by the commotion occasioned, the animal immediately sprang into the jungle again and disappeared. The convicts to a man flew back to town, and the surveyor himself followed as quickly as he could, leaving the theodolite where it lay on the ground. It was a long time before the people in town could be brought to believe that a tiger really had been seen, and it was only on an appeal to the broken fragments of the theodolite—in the nature of that made by Macaulay in his lays to the molten image of Horatius—that unbelief was finally overcome. After this no work was done near the jungle but under arms, though it was some years before the next tiger showed itself. If these animals were not indigenous to the island, it may be asked, how came they there? and this was a question which for a time puzzled conjecture. But it was before long determined, and I think satisfactorily, in a rather singular manner. The old strait that lies between the back of the island and the mainland of the peninsula is a favourite fishing ground in certain seasons of the year, and is then thickly spread over on the Sin-

gapore side with stakes and nets. Early one morning a party of Malay fishermen, who had set their nets overnight, proceeded to examine what luck they had had, and were surprised to find secured in their meshes a large female tiger. The animal had in its struggles to get free thoroughly entangled itself, and was completely exhausted, and nearly drowned. There was still some life left, however, and the Malays thought it wiser to despatch it before bringing it to shore. From the part of the net in which the animal was entangled, it was clear that it had been approaching from the mainland; it could not have swam off from the Singapore shores, for several rows of nets lying further in were uninjured. This circumstance first directed attention to the probability that it was from Johore that Singapore was supplied with tigers, and it is said that since then they have on several occasions been seen swimming across the channel. It is beyond doubt that, once established on the island, they have since increased and multiplied, but it is probable that considerable reinforcements are still from time to time received from the mainland.

THE ATTACK OF TIGERS.

The manner in which they execute their destruction upon man is simple and uniform. Though ferocious, they are cowardly to a degree, and while I have inquired into the circumstances attending every death by tigers for a number of years back, I have been unable to find one case where the victim was not come upon unawares, and from behind. The animal moves rapidly and noiselessly through the tangled brushwood of the jungle as near to its intended victim as possible, and there keeps watch, it may be for hours, for a fitting opportunity. This occurs when, if the poor fellow be a gambier planter, he is intent upon stepping some out-of-the-way branch of its leaves, and has his back turned to the direction of the tiger. The brute then steps forth slowly in a crouching attitude till within seven or eight yards, when it gives one fierce and well-directed bound forward, and down goes the man, dead with the first stroke of the beast's muscular paw. In an instant the tiger seizes the body, generally by the neck, and tossing it across its back, bounds into the jungle, where it is safe. It is at all events some comfort to reflect that however horrible the death may appear it is quickly suffered. There is every probability that the unhappy victim loses all consciousness, and indeed every spark of life, with the first fell stroke that knocks him down; for in almost every body that is recovered the back of the head is found completely smashed in, or the neck is found broken, the impression of the animal's paw remaining distinctly visible. The force of this blow must be something fearful. I have been told by a gentleman who had travelled a good deal in the peninsula, that he has frequently come upon buffaloes which had been killed and partly devoured by tigers, and in many cases found the frontal bone of the skull, which is nearly an inch thick, smashed in by this crushing blow of the fore-paw. Rescue, therefore, may be said to be impossible, and I only know of one man having escaped from them after being thus struck. This was on the Sirangoon-road about five miles from town. The man was walking slowly along, when from a little eminence on the side of the road, the tiger sprang forth upon him. In springing from the bank, however, the tiger had snapped some branches of a tree, and the man was in the act of turning round to learn the cause of the sound, when the animal alighted upon him. Disconcerted by this motion or thereby missing its aim, the fore-paw of the tiger struck the man's cheek, tearing off the flesh and skin down to his waist; but the blow did not stun him, and he had sufficient presence of mind to draw his parang, or large knife, and make a cut at the animal, on which it retreated back into the jungle.

COWARDICE OF THE TIGER.

I believe that face to face a tiger will not attack a human being, unless he displays a thorough want of nerve; the Malays are also of this opinion, but express it differently. They say that "if you will only speak to a tiger, and tell it that it can get plenty of food in the jungle beside you, the animal will be persuaded, and leave you unmolested." Unfortunately, few get the chance to speak to the tiger in this way, because, as I have stated, they almost invariably steal up behind those they intend to attack. I have, however, heard the following account told by an old Malay of an attack which he prevented by an appeal to the better nature of the animal. He was returning home after a visit to town to his house at Selita, along that part of the road which I have described as being most thickly surrounded by jungle. He had his little child, a boy of seven or eight years old, slung behind him, and both were contentedly chewing away at jagong (Indian corn), when the father on lifting up his eyes saw a tiger crouching down right in front of him, and apparently preparing for a spring. Calling to mind the old saying, he gasped out a few sounds and found that they appeared to arrest the tiger, but being anxious not to risk the life of his son, he moved slowly backward to a tree which he remembered to have passed a few yards behind. The tiger advanced upon him step for step as he retreated. When the old man's back touched the tree, he told his son to climb up. This the boy did, and the father relieved of anxiety on his account, drew his wood-knife and commenced an advance, arguing all the while with the keenest logic—sharpened no doubt by the occasion—that it would be infinitely better for both to part without quarrelling. This advance and retreat continued for about fifty yards, when the tiger, either persuaded by the logic, or daunted by the bravery of the man, turned tail, and bolted into the jungle.

Notwithstanding the alleged cowardice of the tiger, we candidly admit that we should entertain an insuperable objection to being on speaking terms with such a treacherous acquaintance, and the more so if it had fasted for any length of time.