

TIGERS IN SINGAPORE

(From our Tropical Possessions in Malayan India. By John Cameron, Esq., F.R.G.S.)

I am fully convinced that 365 men per annum have their lives dashed out by the crushing stroke of the tiger's paw. In the first place, there are the indisputable proofs of at least forty cases in the year recovered in the mangled corpses of the victims. Dating a year back from the period at which I now write, there have been recovered no less than forty-one bodies in all conditions of hideous dismemberment, leaving no earthly doubt as to the manner in which the poor fellows met their deaths. In the same period I find that eighty-five additional cases have been reported to the police, in which the bodies could not be found. This would give only a little over a third of the number I have set down; but the cases substantiated can never, under the peculiar circumstances, be expected to reach a larger proportion than this of the deaths that actually take place from tigers. It must be borne in mind that the victims are almost invariably Chinamen, and that the distance from town of the localities where these deaths take place is seldom less than five miles, and oftener fourteen. For the neighbours of a man who had been carried away by a tiger to come into the nearest police station would of itself necessitate the loss of a day's labour, and this loss would probably be extended to two or three days before the body of the victim was recovered and laid in the grave. Now Chinamen, though of a kindly disposition to their own countrymen—at least to those of the same clan or hoey—and willing to aid and assist one another to the extent of their power, are nevertheless strongly utilitarian, and reckon one living man more worth looking after than a thousand dead ones. They know, by sad experience, that a tiger having once seized his prey never leaves it till life is extinct, and that therefore all the time and money they may spend, if not in the search of the body, at least in reporting the matter to the police, is a needless waste for which they are not paid upon either in aid of the living or respect of the dead. It is asserted, besides, that Chinamen have a superstitious aversion to expose the dead bodies of their friends to people not of their own nationality and religion. It may very reasonably be believed, therefore, that even where there is no interested motive for concealment, many and many a poor Chinaman is carried away by a tiger, and his remains either left unsought for in the jungle, or, if sought for and found, quietly interred near the spot where he had suffered. But it is beyond all doubt that interested motives also combine to still further prevent our obtaining a knowledge of the true measure of mortality in the island caused by tigers. The men most exposed to danger are those who work on the gambler 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 or 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 gambler 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 it was then 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. ... What has induced these animals to leave the mainland of Johore, where the forests are undisturbed, for the limited jungles of Singapore, it is difficult to say, unless it be their horrible love for human blood. In Johore game is plentiful; there are deer and wild hogs in much greater abundance than in Singapore, and a host of other animals besides, that are unknown on the island, among which are the buffalo, rhinoceros, and elephant; indeed, as far as animal life is concerned, it is beyond all doubt that the mainland is richer in every species except man. On the island, however, they have now established themselves, nor does it seem at all probable that they will leave it as long as a strip of jungle remains. 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 gambler planter, he is intent upon stripping 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 Srangoon-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. Either disconcerted by this motion, or thereby missing its aim, the forepaw 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. 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 tigers 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 the 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, 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. The 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.

But it is seldom that any account can be rendered of encounters with tigers, beyond that which is to be gathered from the mangled remains of the victims. These are presented to the beholder in every variety of dismemberment and mutilation. A leg, a foot, an arm, and sometimes the head is gone. From two recently recovered bodies the heads only were missing, and the other parts apparently untouched. In some cases the chest is torn open and the heart and lungs devoured, while in a few the body has been found perfect, but sucked completely dry of blood—a gash and the mark of the animal's fangs on the throat showing where the suction had been applied. The thigh, however, appears to be the part best liked by the tigers, and in the greater number of bodies recovered both thighs are eaten to the bone, while below the knee the leg is untouched. It is a horrible spectacle, the view of one of these mangled corpses, and raises up in the breast of the beholder a feeling of malignant hatred against these brute murderers.