A BOOK OF MAN-EATERS

by

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CHAPTER IX

THE MAN-EATERS OF SAGAR ISLAND

THE dense and impenetrable jungle of the Sundarbans, comprising marsh, morass, and forest, has always been famous as the haunt of man-eating tigers. It harbours other wild beasts. Buffalo and deer, pig and antelope, have found there a safe retreat. It is intersected by a network of streams ; it contains no villages, and is little frequented by man. It has seldom been visited even by enterprising English sportsmen, for the game it contains is practically inaccessible in this intricate jungle. Tigers sometimes swim across the channels of the Ganges delta, and have even been know to board boats upon the water.

On the eastward side of the Hughli channel, through which the ships of all nations have sailed or steamed on the way to Calcutta, lies Sagar Island, a large tract of jungle-covered ground. In the days of sailing-ships it was sometimes visited by people from Calcutta, or by landing-parties from the boats of passing vessels, when they anchored off the shore. But it is probable that it was generally given a wide berth after the death from the jaws of man-eating tigers of two European visitors towards the latter end of the eighteenth century.

The first of these tragedies is recorded in the *Annual Register* for 1787 in a letter dated from Calcutta on

October 12th, 1786, and it is worthy of remark that the record states that "this melancholy accident shows that a tyger is not always deterred from approaching fire." A small vessel bound from Ganjam to Calcutta, being longer on the passage than was expected, ran out of provisions and water: being near Sagar Island, the Europeans, six in number, went on shore in search of refreshments. There were some coconuts on the island, in quest of which they strayed a considerable way. Darkness coming on and the vessel being at a distance, it was thought safer to take up a night's lodging in the ruins of an old pagoda than to return to the vessel. A large fire was lighted and it was agreed that two of the number should keep watch by turns, to alarm the rest in case of danger which they had reason to apprehend from the wild appearance of the place. It fell to the lot of one Dawson, late a silversmith and engraver of Calcutta, to be on watch. In the night a tiger rushed over the fire and, seizing Dawson, sprang off with him in its jaws, but struck its head against the side of the pagoda, rebounding with its prey upon the fire over which they rolled over one another once or twice before the man was carried off. In the morning they found the thighs and legs of the unfortunate victim at some distance, mangled and stripped of flesh.

It was unfortunate that the fate of this man was not known to another party who, in the ship *Ardasier Shaw*, anchored off Sagar Island on December 22nd, 1792. Or if they were aware of the tragedy of six years before, they did not grasp the significance of its lesson which proved the uselessness of fire as a protection against a determined man-eating wild beast. Their story was related in a letter from Captain Consar, one of the party,

published in the *Annual Register* for 1793. The others were Captain George Downey, Lieutenant Pyefinch, and Mr. Munro of the East India Company's Service, a son of Sir Hector Munro. They all landed on Sagar Island to shoot deer. Captain Consar wrote: "We saw innumerable tracks of tigers and deer; but still we were induced to pursue our sport and did so the whole day. About half-past three we sat down on the edge of the jungle to eat some cold meat, sent to us from the ship, and had just commenced our meal when Mr. Pyefinch and a black servant told us there was a fine deer within six yards of us. Captain Downey and I immediately jumped up to take our guns; mine was nearest, and I had just laid hold of it when I heard a roar like thunder, and saw an immense royal tiger spring on the unfortunate Munro, who was sitting down; in a moment his head was in the beast's mouth, and it rushed into the jungle with him with as much ease as I could lift a kitten, tearing him through the thickest bushes and trees, everything yielding to its monstrous force. The agonies of horror, regret, and fear rushed on me at once, for there were two tigers; the only effort I could make was to fire at the tiger, though the poor youth was still in its mouth. I relied partly on Providence, partly on my own aim, and fired a musket, saw the tiger stagger and agitated, and cried out so immediately. Captain Downey then fired two shots and I one more; we retired from the jungle and a few minutes afterwards Mr. Munro came up to us all over blood, and fell. We took him on our backs to the boat, and got every medical attendance for him from the *Valentine*, Indiaman, which lay at anchor near the island, but in vain. He lived twenty-four hours after,

but in the extreme of torture ; his head and skull were all torn and broken to pieces, and he was also wounded by the animal's claws all over the neck and shoulders ; but it was better to take him away, though irrecoverable, than to leave him to be devoured limb by limb. We have just read the funeral service over his body and committed it to the deep. He was an amiable and promising youth.

I must observe there was a large fire blazing close to us composed of ten or a dozen whole trees ; I made it myself on purpose to keep the tigers off, as I had always heard it would. There were eight or ten of the natives with us, and many shots had been fired at the place, and much noise and laughing at the time, but this ferocious animal disregarded all.

The human mind cannot form an idea of the scene ; it turned my very soul within me. The beast was about four and a half feet high and nine feet long. His head appeared as large as that of an ox, his eyes darting fire, and his roar when he first seized his prey will never be out of my recollection. We had scarcely pushed our boat from that cursed shore when the tigress made her appearance, almost raging mad, and remained on the sand as long as the distance would allow me to see her."

These two stories are typical instances of the futility of trusting to fire for safety from the attacks of wild beasts. They confirm many other similar instances given in this book, and they are of special interest as furnishing examples of fires both by day and by night. Yet it is remarkable that, in spite of all such examples, which amount to proof, the erroneous idea still prevails that travellers are protected from attack by the mere presence of fire. This misconception probably had

its origin in the old-established error that the great cats will attack any human being they happen to meet with, or will search out man as an object of attack. In innumerable books of travel and sport are references to the assumed protection of a camp-fire, while in other parts of the same volumes may be found proof that this confers no immunity. It is an assumption almost universally accepted.

In South America the traveller has little to fear from the jaguar and the puma, which perhaps accounts for so observant a naturalist as W. H. Hudson accepting the popular idea without comment. In his *Naturalist in La Plata* he remarks on the fascinating and confusing effect that light has on animals. This is known to every poacher who hunts birds and beasts with a lantern, or salmon with a torch, both in the British Isles and in the South of India. Hudson tells us that the flashing light of the fire-fly warns raptorial insects and is for the moment a protection, " as the camp-fire the traveller lights in a district abounding with beasts of prey." Then he says that the camp-fires actually serve to attract beasts of prey, but " the confusion and fear caused by the bright glare makes it safe for the traveller to lie down and sleep in the light." It is difficult to find any evidence of confusion and fear on the part of man-eaters in the many recorded instances of men taken from beside camp-fires, and with these experiences before us it is certainly not safe to lie down and sleep with no other protection when there is a man-eater about. No doubt the fire attracts, and consequently may itself be a danger, but the traveller had better not trust to the glare for safety ; should he do so he may have a rude awakening—if he ever awakes

CARRYING THE MAN-EATER TO CAMP

again ! But whether there is a fire or not, the camp is safe unless there is a man-eater in the neighbourhood. This is the experience of those who have slept in the open for the sake of the coolness in tropical hot nights where lions, tigers, or leopards abound.

In India the present writer has heard tigers moaning near by, as Mr. Roosevelt described the lions moaning near his camp in Africa—but it never occurred to him that it was unsafe to sleep outside the tent or to have any camp-fire kept up at night, although the harsh cry of the leopard was nightly heard not far off; these animals would approach quite close to the camp; one even came to drink at a trough near his bed in the middle of the night, and paid a visit again on the next night. Undoubtedly it is wise to have fires, and watchers beside them, when the camp is in the haunts of a man-eater. But travellers would be well-advised to trust to neither fire nor light as a protection. The light is useful to reveal to the watcher the approach of the man-eater, which will keep at a distance when it knows that it is observed, or it can be shot or driven off. Only it is not the camp-fire itself, but the sentry or watcher beside it, that furnishes an element of protection against the beast of prey.

In the case of the Sagar Island man-eaters, the parties would have been safer had they bivouacked in open ground away from the jungle, for the dense cover enabled the tiger to approach unobserved. This kind of protection was recognised in former days when roads in India were more haunted by man-eating tigers than they are now. In the time of Warren Hastings a new road was cut through the districts of Ramgarh, Raghunathpur, and Bandbissanpur to shorten by nearly

200 miles the route from Calcutta to Benares. The old route followed the course of the Ganges. The engineer who carried out the work was Captain Charles Rankin, and he and after him his brother were allowed an annual sum by the Government for keeping up the road, and a further payment for destroying the jungle for a distance of fifty yards on either side of it. For it passed through a wild forest region infested by tigers, and fifty clear yards precluded a tiger from approaching in daylight unobserved within charging distance of the wayfarer.

A curious incident in Captain Consar's story of the death of Munro, was the pursuit of the party by the tigress, and its behaviour on the beach. In this the man-eater, whether tiger or tigress, and the narrator said that there were two tigers, behaved as these animals generally do, and, baulked of its prey, followed in the hope of retrieving the corpse. The same habit is observed in the case of other man-eaters, both lions and tigers. It is interesting to recall that on August 19th, 1798, the ship *Fitzwilliam*, carrying the future Duke of Wellington and the headquarters of his regiment, struck on Sagar reef, and was got off, as Colonel Arthur Wellesley wrote, by the bodily strength of the men of the 33rd. If the weather had not been moderate all must have been lost. Those who escaped drowning might have fallen victims to man-eating tigers which infested the jungles of Sagar Island.

Surgeon Daniel Johnson, in his book on *Indian Field Sports*, writing in about 1800 of the road made in the time of Warren Hastings, relates that soon after leaving Calcutta the route traversed the Chittra Ghat, a pass through the mountains. The new road often passed

over ravines which afforded shelter to beasts of prey. At every village near the passes were stationed *ghat-wars* to accompany travellers through the *ghats* or passes. They had a strange appearance, being generally covered with the skin of a tiger or leopard, and carried a bow and arrows ornamented with peacocks' feathers, a large shield, a spear or matchlock, and a sword. These people gave more confidence than protection. They were given land and an allowance by the Raja and were also tipped by travellers.

Tigers were in those days very numerous and destructive, whole villages being depopulated in the Ramgarh district. Surgeon Johnson relates that he sat up at night over a bullock to watch for a tiger, a *kulassi*, or tent-pitcher, being with him. At midnight an owl perched over their heads and hooted; then a jackal came along and uttered the peculiar call which these animals make when attendant on a beast of prey. The superstitious native, alarmed by these omens, begged him not to shoot if the tiger did come, or one of them would certainly be killed. They heard the tiger pass close by, but not in sight. A week later the bullocks started on the march taking the tents with the *kulassi*. Suddenly the bullock-drivers heard a horrible roar, followed by screams, and saw a tiger run over a small hill with the *kulassi* in its mouth. The bullocks threw off their loads and ran off in different directions; the men were panic-stricken, and it was some minutes before they could articulate. They then said that as the *kulassi* was driving the hindmost bullock through a nullah, the tiger sprang on him from behind a bush, and knocked him down; but owing to the nature of the ground, it passed over him after delivering

the blow. Then the tiger returned, took the man up in his mouth by the thigh and made off with him at full speed with his head dangling on the ground. They followed for more than a mile, and found the corpse with all the entrails torn out and the flesh of one thigh and leg devoured. All believed that the owl was the omen of his death, of which the jackal gave vocal warning.

A tigress with two cubs lurked about the Katkamsandy Pass and killed a man, sometimes two, almost every day. Ten or twelve of these were post-runners, and communication between Calcutta and the Upper Provinces was almost cut off. A gentleman was travelling up the new road at this time in a palanquin carried by eight bearers, with two linkmen and two others carrying provisions and baggage. Early in the morning the tigress was seen, but the traveller urged his men to go on ; so they put down the palanquin and ran away, and he had to return to Hazaribagh. On another occasion a jemadar (native officer) and 40 soldiers were escorting treasure from Hazaribagh to Chittra, when in the middle of the pass they saw the tigress lying in the road. Having no orders to fire, the jemadar marched back to cantonments for instructions, and the commandant ordered him to fix bayonets and return, but the tigress had then gone.

On the same road two Brinjaras, the gypsies of India, were driving a string of laden bullocks, when the rear man was seized by a tiger. This was observed by a herdsman, who ran and cut at the tiger with his sword ; the beast dropped the Brinjara and seized the herdsman, whose buffaloes then turned on the tiger and drove it off, but too late to save his life. The first man

recovered. Then an elderly man and his wife were each carrying home a bundle of wood. As they were resting their burdens on the ground, the man heard a noise, and on looking round saw a tiger running off with the woman in its mouth. He ran after it and struck it on the back with an axe, which made the tiger drop her. She was taken in to the district hospital; one breast was torn off, the other lacerated, and there were several deep wounds in the back of her neck, but she recovered in six months.

Another victim was an old Mahomedan priest, who was travelling at midday on horseback, within a few miles of Chittra, with his son, an athletic young man, walking beside him, when they heard a tiger roaring. The son urged his father to hasten, but the priest said that there was no danger, and the tiger would not molest them. He began to offer prayers, in the course of which the tiger charged, knocked him off his horse, and carried him away. The son ran after the tiger and cut at it with his sword; it dropped the old man, picked up the son, and made off into the jungle. The old priest was carried into Chittra, where he died the same day; the son was never heard of again.

It is fortunate that in course of time English sportsmen killed a great many of these animals. One Mr. Henry Ramus, Judge on Circuit in Behar, was said to have shot 360 tigers at the beginning of the last century, and as the numbers were reduced there must have been a reduction also in the bills of mortality, but at that early period statistics of deaths from wild animals were not compiled. There were many stone cairns to be seen along the roads in Bengal, marking the places where people had been killed. When

a man was carried off by a tiger, a stick was erected with a piece of coloured cloth at the top as a warning to travellers. Every passer-by threw a stone on the spot, and large heaps were accumulated. Early in the last century such heaps were abundant in the Ramgarh district.

When tigers infested a particular road or pass a Hindu *yogi* would erect a temporary hut near and remain in it all day. Travellers used to assemble; the *yogi* would sacrifice a fowl, over which he would say a prayer, offering it to the deity on behalf of the company so that they might not become food for tigers. Each traveller gave him something. They then journeyed on with perfect confidence; if one was killed by a tiger, the Hindu said that his sins were too great to admit of the deity receiving his intercession.

Tigers must have been terribly destructive to both people and cattle before the advent of English sportsmen, among whom the district officers were conspicuous and did much to keep down the numbers of these animals. Thus Buchanan Hamilton wrote of the Gorakhpur district, that when the English took possession of the country, tigers were bold and numerous; soon after that event a sentinel was carried off even in the middle of the town of Gorakhpur. But tigers soon became less bold and, several Europeans of the station being keen sportsmen, their numbers had been greatly reduced. There is a terrible account of the year 1769, which was a famine year, when, most of the herbivorous animals having perished, the tigers were famishing, and great numbers infested the town of Bhiwapur, where in a very short time they killed 400 of the inhabitants; the survivors fled, and for

some years the town was deserted. A fine sportsman, Mr. Parry Okeden, and his friends, when stationed in Moradabad, killed over 300 tigers between the years 1823 and 1841, as recorded in his diary.

In 1876 a family of tigers destroyed a large number of people in the country to the south of Hazaribagh, escaping all the sportsmen who hunted them. A great expedition accompanied by some English soldiers went after them, and a wide extent of country was beaten without success. It was related that an officer travelling in a palanquin through their beat at night employed a double relay of torch-bearers, and also had some men to keep up a tattoo on drums, but a tiger rushed out and carried off the last man of the party. Some of the tigers were at length captured in a pitfall, and one was exhibited in the Calcutta Zoological Gardens.

A gallant deed was related in the Report of a Survey Officer in the Sundarbans a few years ago. An Indian surveyor was seated at a table at work when an assistant close to him was seized and carried off by a tiger. Without hesitation the surveyor took his brass sight-ruler, weighing about two pounds, and ran after the tiger. He came up with the beast and beat it over the head with the ruler until it dropped its victim and made off. The man was deservedly promoted for his gallantry, but unfortunately the assistant was killed in the first onslaught.

There are many superstitions relating to the tiger. In the Deccan I found an idea prevalent among my native followers that the aboriginal Gonds had the power of protecting tigers from the hunter by deflecting his bullets, and I was advised in consequence to make

friends with the Gond Raja when shooting in his neighbourhood. And each year, in deference to my people, the tiger-hunting expedition in the jungles of the Pein Gunga used to begin with the sacrifice of a goat at the tomb of a Muhammadan saint, Shaikh Farid, near Fort Mahor, both Hindus and Musalmans joining in the rites, and all of us afterwards eating the flesh of the goat. On the way back a foot of the sacrificial animal used to be hung in a little dilapidated hut, on the top of which a ragged pennon fluttered, and within a red-painted stone formed a symbol of the jungle god. Certainly this was followed by success, for invariably the valley below the tomb, and that in which the Hindu shrine was situated, furnished several tigers, while many were brought to bag in the jungles beyond. After each tiger was killed, a similar sacrifice was carried out at the shrine of the local red symbol, a goat being anointed with wine, and its throat cut when it bowed down before the graven image. It must not, however, be supposed that the stone itself was worshipped; it was merely regarded as a symbol of the Spirit of the Wild.

The Gonds averred that the tiger-god, in the form of a great White Tiger, protected them when they invoked its aid in driving off any specially destructive beast of prey, tiger or leopard, and man-eater or cattle-killer. Thus a leopard which had been carrying off children from a village in the Gond Raja's domain was driven away by this protector shortly before my arrival on the scene.

There is a remarkable story illustrating the widely prevalent superstition that a man-eater is accompanied by the spirit of its last victim, which warns it of the

presence of danger. A native hunter sat in a tree over the corpse of a man killed by a tiger. The monster approached to renew the feast, whereupon the corpse raised a grisly right arm and pointed to the watcher in the tree, and the tiger retreated. The watcher descended, pegged down the offending hand, and resumed his vigil. Again the tiger came, but the left hand was raised in warning. Once more the shikari got down, pegged down that hand also, and climbed up to his ambush. The monster approached, there was now nothing to warn him, and when he bent down to feed a well-placed bullet ended his evil life.

A curious belief that the man-eating tiger bears a distinctive mark in the form of a cross on the left side of the body, was found by Colonel Ferris to be prevalent in the Sawantwari State in Western India. A tigress with a three-quarter grown cub had killed a number of people, and was said not to eat them, but to pass them over to her cub, on which the natives averred the man-eating mark would be found. When the cub was shot, the man-eating mark was there in the form of a distinct cross. This was in country bordering on Roman Catholic Goa, so the idea may have a religious origin. Markings on tigers vary greatly with the individual, and assume many patterns, and the cross mark was no doubt a coincidence. If the natives had been near enough to see the corpses of the dead dealt with by the tigress and cub, they may have been near enough to see the mark of the cross on the living animal, although Colonel Ferris said that they could not have seen the mark, and they told him of it six weeks before he shot the beast. He afterwards killed the tigress, but does not state whether it bore a cross or not.