

Bearding the Burmese Tiger

A Story of Oriental Adventure in the Island of Pahree

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ONE morning Emir Alli came to me as I waited in Dan's bungalow at Kyouk Pyhou and said the Burmese boat was ready to take us to Pahree Island. Ostensibly we were going to recover my boat that had sunk in the cyclone; in reality I knew that Dan hungered for the gold-and-brown coat of *Sher Bagh* the tiger.

Next morning we started. Of all the buoyant, crazy-hearted craft with which a man ever essayed twisting currents and witch-like winds that chopped around island points, that Burmese conception of a vessel was the most flippant.

As an ark of no destination, and designed to ride the waves, it would have been all right; it was as skittish as an air ship. According to the boat and the wind we desired to visit seven different islands, which we did; but in three days, in the way of a miracle, we came to the village of Myouboung on Pahree Island.

When we asked for men to search for my sunken boat the Burmese talked of the prodigious plowing and rice planting that was at hand. Even then they were resting up their muscles for the toil; and presently, when the padouk tree had flowered three times, when its great purple clusters festooned it like Chinese lanterns, they would go down into the terraced rice plots in the flats with their water buffalo and plow with diligence—also with the little wooden crotch of a tree which was a rudimentary plow.

Dan laughed ironically; for these men of toil were sleeping and eating, and vying with the lilies of the field in idleness.

"What is it—why do they not jump at the chance to earn money?" I asked Emir Alli.

"It is because of *Bagh*, sahib; they are afraid. They sit here, and the sun opens their hands in the morning that they may work; but they smoke cheroots, even opium, and in the night the cold closes their hands and they sleep."

"Ask them of the tiger," I said.

Yes, of him there was talk beyond all recording. There was the lord of the jungle, and the lady of the jungle, tiger and tigress, to say nothing of the cub; the same fierce family that had stalked me as I slept by the fire after the boat wreck. The tigers had killed at Myouboung, at the village of Shwetha, at Tharetprin—in fact the whole island of Pahree was in toll to them. Even there at Myouboung they had mauled Pho Tha in broad daylight as he herded his hairless buffalo in the grove of wild mango trees close to the village.

And now these accursed destroyers would be with them all through the rains perhaps. The tigers had come from the mainland, swimming to the island, and now that the water was rough they would not go away again. All night the villagers sat up and burned fires, and fired off their guns to keep *Bagh* away.

"Guns! Who had guns?" I asked.

At my question, the myook (headman) coughed, blinked his eyes, and rolled the huge wad of beetelnut in his mouth nervously. Guns were prohibited to the natives, except by license.

Yes, to be sure, he meant one gun, which he, as headman, might possess. That the other guns he had inadvertently spoken of were necessary to these simple village folk when they took up their occasional role of dacoit, I knew full well; but that was not my line of work, so we continued on with the subject of tiger.

Yes, if we would bag the tiger and his hungry wife and child, the villagers would go with us to grapple for the boat. They would even accept twice their ordinary wage, which was little to extort from a sahib.

And knowledge of the tiger's whereabouts was most explicit. According to one villager, *Bagh* was at Tharetprin; another knew where he was in hiding at Shwetha; he had also made a kill the night before at a village six miles from either of these places. It was confusing—absolutely oriental. When in doubt give it up and pray, is the method of the Buddhist; and instead of keeping track of Huzoor Stripes, they had been hanging festoons of wax-petaled jasmine on the little pagoda near the village, and sticking patches of gold-leaf beside the placid stone Buddha that sat, all indifferent, a square-fingered hand idly in his lap.

But amongst all the villagers there was one sane

man—Lah Boh, the huntsman. Of course he had no gun; we as sahibs were to believe that, because he said so. But still, as we had guns most excellent, and, being sahibs, had not livers that would turn to water when the fierce tiger curled the bristles of his mouth at us, he would most absolutely bring us in the way of making a kill of the dreaded beast.

He alone knew where the tiger would sup that night; the others who chattered like moon-faced monkeys, were eaters of opium, and men who had dreams.

At Shwetha we would surely find *Bagh*, for he had brought the matter of his kills to a routine. He circled the Island, passing from village to village, even as a carp feeds in a pond. Yes, he was due that night at Shwetha.

Lah Boh spoke in the manner of one announcing the arrival day of a steamer.

Shwetha was two hours by footpath, and we could make it before dark.

So to Shwetha we went by the way that a path should have run if there had been one. Lah Boh gathered his *putsoe* about his loins till the dragons tattooed in blue on his thighs were laid bare, and slipped through the jungle unerringly. But the handicap of our slower going made it three hours of trail, and a peacock from a lofty banyan tree was bidding good-night to the setting sun with discordant "Miow," when we reached Shwetha.

Now it would be too late to carry out our plan of a tied-up bullock, and a *machan* in a tree, too late to build the *machan*, Lah Boh said.

But Dan had a plan of exceeding craziness. Nothing but a brilliant success would have removed the stigma of idiocy from his proposition. We could do without the *machan*, Dan declared; many times we had shot wild pigs together in just this *machanless* way, concealing ourselves on the ground under a cover of leaf branches—our Express rifles would surely stop Stripes if he essayed our hiding place.

I objected—it was too risky.

When we appealed to Lah Boh, the Buddhist was indifferent. Who was he, a slave of the sahibs, to interfere if they took the risk? The white men were gods who accomplished all things, only—and he spoke in a whisper—this tiger travelled in company with an evil spirit that told him everything; else how had he left a kill half eaten when the villagers had sat in a tree over it with guns, waiting for his return the second night.

Dan had his way, and a bamboo cart-cover was placed on the ground where the rice fields met the jungle, and over this was thatched a leaf cover in the way of deceit.

Lah Boh advised a goat for the tie-up; the goat would call out of fear, and *Bagh* would surely come to the summons.

The nanny was tied to a small tree twenty yards up wind from the open end of our ground *machan*.

In the village all the cattle, even the pariah dogs, had been carefully gathered into a stockade, so that the tiger should not have a chance to pick and choose.

"*Bagh* will come first to the village," said Lah Boh; "then when he finds no kill he will circle through the jungles in his hunger, and hearing the goat, will come for his small carcass. Perhaps only the one tiger will come, for they do not hunt together always. I think *Baghni* (tigress) takes the cub away with her lest *Bagh* will kill him, for that often happens in a tiger family. If you hear the tum-tums and the gong at the village, sahib, you will know that the men are frightening away the jungle king."

Then Lah Boh and Emir Alli went back to the village, leaving the two sahibs, Dan and myself, who were the originators of this mad scheme, to crawl into the shelter that was like a dog's kennel, where we lay side by side, our double-barrelled Express rifles trained on the goat.

"I hope the tiger turns up," Dan said, as he lighted a cheroot.

"I hope he doesn't," I replied; "and he won't while you smoke."

"You've been reading stories of tiger hunts written in Fleet Street by penny-liners," Dan retorted. "The man scent—in this case the sahib scent—will carry farther than the tobacco; besides, do you think that this striped highway robber, who has bottled up all the natives in their huts night after night, cares a snap for the smell of a cheroot. Per-

haps the tobacco taint will kill the sahib odour, which these jungle dwellers dread, though God knows how they have come to that knowledge."

"We'll be caught like rats in a trap if *Bagh* turns rusty," I replied.

"More big game literature; the charging tiger is a *rara avis*. Doesn't Higgins of Chittagong go out and shoot them in broad daylight on foot. Weren't we with him when he bagged the black leopard that was the worse kind of a cat."

All this was very logical; but logic has little to do with the state of one's nerves, cooped up in a hen crate in the edge of a jungle with the possible enmity of two offended tigers hanging over one.

Then the heavy Burmese night came down upon us with sensuous fullness. The struggle of the approaching monsoons seemed to have beaten the life out of the air—it hung like a dead thing, almost without current.

Our cover was pitched under a padouk, whose blossoms die the day they are born, and now, like falling dew, the petals dropped about us with their smothering incense; and from the untilled rice fields beyond a ghost-like mist was rising.

From the village came the warning cry of the disconsolate pariahs; and over in the jungle a jackal pack was lamenting the everlasting hunger pains that was their lot.

Everything animate was articulate, even to the shrill tree crickets, except our goat. He that should have been luring the tiger to us, was browsing in sweet content.

As I trained the night sights of my rifle—which were knots of white cotton—on the complacent beast, I felt tempted to pull the trigger.

For two hours we lay, our straining ears glean- ing nothing but the discordant sounds of the jungle. Then suddenly things commenced to move in the village; it was a great noise—it was louder than a Wagner concert.

"The tiger!" Dan whispered.

Even the goat, startled, bleated.

"I'm going to tie that beast up on his hind legs—he's too happy," Dan muttered, as our bait relapsed into silence. My comrade slipped out, and when he came back the nanny reproached him persistently.

The uproar in the village died away; the jackals were hushed; and there was only the pathetic bleat of the goat.

"The tigers are working this way," Dan whispered, "for the jungle is hushed in fear."

For half an hour we waited, not speaking, our limbs stinging because of their rigid quiet.

Presently Dan's elbow telegraphed a warning at my side. I also heard a stealthy step. It was just the leaves or the grass whispering that something of dread passed.

"Sp-f-f—sp-f-f—sp-f-f," long intervals between each slipping sound, as though the animal balanced its weight before the next foot was placed.

Even the goat had heard, and fear strangled its voice to a faint whimper.

I knew not from which side the prowling one came; there was just the stealthy creep so impossible of location. My eyes made out nothing in the moonlight, but the goat, grotesquely waltzing on its hind legs like a faun.

The creep, creep, creep of the cautious steps continued; it seemed an age since I had heard the slip of the tiger's huge pads.

But it was coming nearer; more distinctly spoke the rustling grass. And now I could locate the prowler; behind our hiding place, and toward our feet, the deliberate visitor approached.

Much better to be out in daylight with Higgins than there with a tiger taking us in the rear, I thought.

It seemed as though the animal crept by inches. It was impossible to turn in our narrow cover; and yet nerves were almost mastering reason, threatening to yank me right-about-face to the tiger.

I could hear his breath now and then; he was certainly clawing at our leaf cover.

Dan had not moved a muscle; his composure was all that restrained me from an insane turn.

I tried to reason out the extraordinary movement of the tiger. If he had caught our scent—he couldn't see us—why had he not cleared out; that would be more natural. Probably he was stalking the goat from behind what he took to be a bush, for it's