



"Tiger!" came a beater's cry. And he binged his gasoline can as it wallowed through the swamp.

MAN-EATING TIGER ... PLENTY MAD!

EXCEPT at the causeway which connects the island of Singapore with the mainland of Malaya, the Straits of Johore are more than a mile wide. Nevertheless, in the old days, tigers roamed freely on the island until hunters so depopulated them that, when I left Singapore some years ago, tigers had become exceptional.

Back numbers of the Straits Times record many instances of people, mostly Chinese and Indian farmers and road workers, being killed by man-eating tigers, but the last authentic instance of such a death was in 1891, the victim being a beachcomber of unknown nationality. That tragedy occurred on Christmas Eve, and from then on, with few if any omissions, a tiger was killed each Christmas in the vicinity of Seletar, within two or three miles of the spot where a decrepit old man-eater made a meal fifty-odd years ago!

Samat, my Malay tracker, who was also a pawang, or witch doctor, told me repeatedly, with great palaver, that every tiger killed near Seletar at Hari Isa (Christmas time) is a descendant of the man-eater who killed the beachcomber, and is possessed by that unfortunate man's soul!

Old Doctor Peralta is credited with killing the tiger which ate the unknown beachcomber; and also with slaying five of the beast's successors. After that, according to old Doc's diary, Bill Hermiston, of Johore, came over to bag three, while a Colonel Wilson scratched

up a score of seven tigers in ten years. Young Doc Peralta killed his first Christmas tiger when he was in his fifteenth year. Then, carrying on old Doc's diary, he bagged his last one right under my nose on his marriage eve. This adventure, which almost left the bride-to-be waiting at the church, is the one I am about to describe.

I never did become a member of the "Singapore Tiger Club," although I claim that I should have, for I shot a tiger on an island midway between Singapore and Johore, and under Singapore jurisdiction. As this happened on Christmas Eve, I said to Samat, "There won't be a tiger on Singapore tomorrow." The old reprobate disagreed, insisting that the soul of the long-defunct beachcomber would transfer itself to another tiger and carry on according to tradition. To prove him wrong, I called up Young Doc and arranged the Christmas Day hunt.

It was cocksure that the tiger I killed had been Singapore-bound, for we had tracked him into the water at the mouth of the Sungai Dangar on the mainland, and followed him to the island. Meanwhile, I had an invitation to eat "specially imported Carolinas wild turkey" for dinner. Furthermore, at 4 o'clock on Christmas morning it was raining as it can rain only in the tropics. Hence, I found myself with no ambition to hunt. It was a miserable start. And of course there would be no tiger, for hadn't I already shot him the night before?

Samat grinned at my gloomy foreboding as we drove over the greasy

roads of reddish laterite, or decayed rock, and declared firmly that there surely would be a tiger. Did not the Old One always come? And had not he, Samat, made talk with the jungle spirits?

It was still raining, a torrential downpour, when I reached the rendezvous at Sempang village, a crow flight of only eight miles from Johore Bahru, but a good fifty miles by Singapore roads. It was late, and young Doc was fuming. But old Doc Peralta, carrying with assurance his eighty-odd years and his old .405 Winchester, merely smiled and said the tiger would wait.

Sarcastically I asked, "What tiger?" Young Doc cut in elatedly to explain that a tiger had taken a Chinese farmer's hog at sundown Christmas Eve. He had been scared off by a plane from the naval air base, and airmen from Seletar had set out to hunt him, practically with flashlights. At the moment the beast was in a patch of second growth—belukar, the Malays call it—near the Straits; Rampat Ali, his tracker, had actually seen the brute. The tall Indian stepped forward grinning, and said the tiger was bunyah jahat—plenty mad. I felt that I would have been angry too, had I been chased off a meal and spent the night wet and hungry in that land of plenty.

None of the others who were to hunt showed up. Rampat Ali had been able to turn out only a dozen or so beaters, most of them city-softened Hindu Tamils—members of the ancient Dravidian race, with wavy hair and broad flat noses. I managed to persuade an-

A hunt that nearly changed a wedding party into a funeral

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other dozen Chinese beaters to join us, but even that made a hopelessly inadequate number, for we knew the Tamils would bunch together for safety in the thick brush. Twenty-odd beaters, and only three guns, never could get a tiger out of that cover, so I had less enthusiasm than ever for the job in hand.

After consultation with the Peraltas, I sent the beaters off with Samat to plunge into the belukar from the south. Old Doc, in the car, would follow a road that edged a rubber estate, while

young Doc would cover the opposite side of the belukar. I was to take the north side and station myself where a small stream ran into the Straits of Johore.

My spot was a poor one, for tallalang grass (used for thatching native huts) grew right down to the water, and visibility was limited to fifteen yards in any direction. Young Doc would have an even worse position, once he struck the coastline. There he would find a forty-foot-wide swamp covered with mangroves, and after that, lalang, out of which rose a few "islands" of reddish bare earth. I felt that any tiger fool enough to get himself shot in that setup would have to be on a Yuletide bender.

A crackling burst of Chinese firecrackers was followed by the beater's "Hai-hai-hai!" Then came the terrific banging of their empty gasoline cans. These sounds cheered me somewhat—and so did Samat's voice as he swore at the beaters for letting off their crackers too soon. Those should be reserved to drive the game from the last

scrap of cover, and I had a vision of the tiger—if any—heading back through the line of men to the shelter of the Singapore Forest Reserve.

The silence that followed Samat's cussing was shattered by a wild, hysterical shriek from one of the Tamils on the left of the line. He had seen the tiger! I took a quick look at the loads in my 12 gauge Magnum—buckshot and rifled slug. An instant later Old Doc's .405 boomed three deliberate shots. I almost exploded with laughter as his Chinese chauffeur shouted from the car, "Lo fu lai!" (the tiger comes!) and Old Doc loosed a torrent of expletives aimed at beast's forebears and the chauffeur's connection with them.

A crocodile splashed in the stream, then something heavier. I watched closely and saw the lalang sway. I aimed at the spot and contemplated a shot, but that was foolish and risky business, so I passed it up. Moving cautiously forward, I came upon the fresh pug marks of a tiger. With a blast of my whistle I signaled Samat to swing his beater line to the east.

Old Doc joined me, puffing a stinking Burma cheroot. He said he had had a chance at the beast, but that the mist was thick where he'd posted himself, his sights had blurred, and he had undershot. The beaters were close now, and I decided to keep moving just ahead of the left of the line. Old Doc came along a little way, then elected to cover our rear from a hummock which gave him good, all-round visibility.

I wallowed through a patch of black, cozy swamp, and a mass of mosquitoes pounced on me like a pack of hobos on a turkey. A beater not more than ten yards away yelled "Tiger!" and bonged frantically on his gasoline can. I struggled to reach a more advantageous spot. A few seconds later Rampat Ali, on the right of the line, hai-hai-hailed and screamed, "REMAU!" (Tiger!) This was followed by a chorus of yells, then Samat shouted to me, "Tuan, tuan! The Old One, walking into the sun!" The tiger was going east—ranging along the line, getting up courage to break back!

I climbed a hummock and got a clear view of the Straits. Presently I saw Young Doc about sixty yards away at the foot of another hummock, watching an opening in the

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As the huge beast reared to attack, Doc turned to his one remaining weapon—his pistol

Tiger—Plenty Mad!

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belukar to the south. A group of five Tamil beaters emerged between us, but the Chinese and the Tamils remaining in the brush were raising an unholy row. Young Doc whipped his Enfield sporter to his shoulder and fired. The sun was in my eyes and the ground was steaming, so I could not pick up his target. He shot again, then straightened up shaking his head. I thought, "That .303 is too light for this kind of work."

A bunch of beaters, Chinese and Tamils, came out about where Young Doc had sent his shot, and I saw Rampat Ali studying the ground. Young Doc yelled and pointed east, but Ali was waving the beaters back into the belukar behind him. Samat shouted, asking my location. I told him, and he called out that the tiger, trailing blood, was heading—

Shouts and a furious burst of fire-crackers drowned the rest of his speech, and after a quick glance at the five beaters squatting between us, I looked toward Young Doc. Tense, he was watching a spot where the belukar jutted into the open country. A movement and a rasping, coughing grunt centered my attention on a point twenty feet below me. Samat yelled, "He is here!" and was answered with a savage snarl. Elated, I thought, "He is mine!" and waited with all senses alert.

Rampat Ali cursed his Tamils for being cowardly. To Samat he said loudly, "Come, man of the jungle, you and I will drive this beast to the lord with the gun."

"Wait," Samat replied; "the Old One is wounded. Let us first make fire torches." I told them to wait until I could go in between them with my gun. Then I looked toward Young Doc, intending to tell him of my plan. He was moving toward me, so I started down the hummock, thinking he had heard our talk.

The beaters in the belukar had been keeping up an incessant din. I was

barely out of Young Doc's sight when I heard a shout from one of the five men who were out in the open. I turned—and saw them all rushing toward me in panic. After hastily crawling back to my vantage point, I could look over their heads and see the tiger slinking toward the Straits.

Forty yards! I aimed—but a black face appeared in my sights.

Before I could get a clear view, the tiger disappeared into a narrow patch of lalang. I yelled to Young Doc, though I hated to do it, for we had a \$50 bet on who would bag the tiger; and he had boasted about getting the skin for his bride of the morrow. However, there was no sign of him, so with a word to Samat I started down the tiger's trail. Samat caught up before I was out of the lalang.

As we burst into the open, we heard the crack of Young Doc's rifle. "Help!" he yelled a fraction of a second later.

Both shot and yell seemed to come from right in front of us. With all speed, Samat and I skirted the narrow patch of lalang into which I had seen the animal disappear, and then we stopped, nonplused. Before us was another low, bare hummock—but no sign of Doc or the tiger! Perhaps thirty seconds passed. I was about to speak when Samat pointed like a setter. We could hear the invisible tiger rasping and swearing, louder now, like a cornered cat. Then, seemingly at our feet, came a gasping cry from Young Doc. Simultaneously, his little Colt .32 stut-tered like a machine gun!

The noise came from seaward, and Samat and I rushed toward a narrow gully that split the low cliff. Suddenly I plunged into a hole and jackknifed into something soft. It was Young Doc! Cussing and squirming, he yelled to me to get off his neck. The tiger was lying within six feet of him. Whether it had been dead or alive when I arrived, I don't know, for Samat leaped upon the beast and slashed the blade of his parang into its brain.

Young Doc had a sprained wrist and a badly wrenched knee (he became a bridegroom in a wheel chair the next day). Between us Samat and I hauled him out of the ten-foot-deep hole, and he explained what had happened. He'd seen the tiger sneaking down toward the mangroves but was unable to shoot for fear of hitting one of the beaters, so he headed down to meet the beast. Then, while keeping his eyes on the lalang ahead, he tumbled into the hole. A couple of minutes later the tiger crashed almost on top of him.

Doc owes his life to the fact that his first shots had broken the tiger's fore-leg. That slowed up the big cat, and Young Doc's next shot broke the shoulder of the wounded leg; but in his haste to reload, in some unexplainable manner the magazine fell out of his rifle. Before he could recover it from the mud, the tiger kicked itself toward him, and as it reared up on its powerful hind legs, Doc cut loose with his .32 pistol. Even then, he said, the tiger had been thrashing around furiously just before I fell into the hole.

It was still short of high noon when we paid off the beaters. With Samat—\$50 richer because of my lost bet (which Young Doc had bestowed on him)—I drove back to Johore Bahru and my date with a Carolina wild turkey.

So ended what was not my last, but certainly my most exciting Singapore Christmas tiger hunt.