

A TIGER TALE

as told by Francis Turner
to Shirley Strong

There are very few people in this world, I feel sure, who have been sat upon for ten minutes by an angry tiger and lived to tell the tale. I have.

I was born in Ceylon where my father was an English tea planter. My home is now in northern India, where I came as a young man to help pioneer a co-operative farming venture in a sparsely populated area near Tanakpur, a rail-head at the foot of the Himalayas on the boundary between India and Nepal, in an area known as the tarai. In those days there was only jungle, swamp, and clearings filled with tall tiger grass, wild animals, and a few native villages. The tarai in those days was a favorite haunt of the famous tiger hunter, Jim Corbett, who is the author of several books about hunting. During the last thirty years or more this area has been turned into an excellent farming area through the efforts of pioneers like ourselves.

My friends and I do a lot of hunting, as our fields are surrounded by jungle. Elephants, deer and wild pigs damage our crops, and tigers and leopards sometimes kill our domestic animals. Deer and pig provide meat for the table, and tiger and leopard skins bring good prices. Tigers do make rather a nuisance of themselves at times killing goats and cattle, but they rarely attack human beings, and in the tarai where game is plentiful they do not become man-eaters.

I have often wondered just what I would do if I were ever attacked by a tiger or a leopard. On the 21st of January, 1967, about ten a.m. I found out.

That morning I was taking my time over breakfast, as I had been out

2.

in the wheat and sugar cane fields most of the night trying unsuccessfully to shoot something for the kitchen. I was not feeling very active and was hoping to spend a lazy day so I would be ready for another night of hunting, but when Jack Paffett, a farming colleague, came and asked me to help track a tiger he had just shot, I readily agreed.

Jack told me that during an early morning round of our fields he had seen a hog-deer in the edge of the sugar cane and shot at it with a double barrel 12-bore shotgun. As he shouted at the dog to come along and help him find the deer, which had run out of sight, this tiger came straight toward him. This is a very unusual thing for a tiger to do. It must have been after the same deer and became angry at being disturbed in its hunting. All Jack saw at first was a slight movement as he looked down the lane in the sugar cane. He stared at it and saw that it was the tiger's paw going down. Then he saw the tiger itself, which was hard to see because it was just the color of the dried leaves on the cane. It was very large and its head looked as big as the end of a 45-gallon oil drum. It was slowly crouching and settling itself and they watched each other about half a minute, wondering what to do.

When Jack saw the tiger begin to sink down between its shoulder blades, he knew it was about to spring, so he gave it an Ely LG cartridge straight in the face at about thirty yards. It jumped up and spun around, there was some rustling in the cane, and that was all. Jack ran the other way toward home. Douglas Hamilton, our Farm Manager, had given strict orders not to shoot this tiger, as it was keeping the wild pigs out of our cane. Jack was wondering what he would have to say, but it was almost certain that the tiger would have attacked if Jack had not shot first.

Knowing it was too risky to go after a tiger alone, Jack called out a group of us to go with him. There was some delay because some of the

3.

men decided to make some IG pellets and I had to give haircuts to my son and Jack's two sons, so Jim Bestic and Jack went on ahead. When I got there Jack and Jim had already tracked the tiger out of the sugar cane and into the jungle. They had found plenty of blood and followed it through the cane into the kher jungle. They found two or three places where the tiger might have been lying down.

Of course none of us had a thought of anything unexpected happening, and the tracking went on in the usual way with a lot of talking and laughing. Sometimes the blood trail got lost, then each man would choose a different route and search separately for the blood trail. When someone found it again, word was passed along and the group carried on together. The two dogs, Spotty and Sambo, had come with me. Through fright they were not taking much interest in the tracking, and if we came to any thick bushes they would always let me go ahead.

When I could no longer find any blood and there seemed no indication of which way the tiger had gone, I decided to go out of the jungle. Monkeys began calling near the edge of the cane field, which probably meant they had seen the tiger go out of the jungle and back into the cane. Archie Campbell and Richard Earland had come and were sitting on the ground near the edge of the cane field waiting. Not being too sure what to do and where to look next, I joined them. We could hear Jack and Jim still pushing through the jungle and calling out to each other to find out which way the trail was leading or if there was any sign of blood at all.

Finally Jack and Jim came out of the jungle and joined us at the edge of the sugar cane, and we all stood near a kher tree and talked over what to do next. We learned later that the tiger had been lying up in the cane about ten yards from us at that time, and when Archie and Richard came they had walked within ten feet of where the tiger had crossed the road into the cane two or three minutes before they arrived.

After some discussion we decided to continue searching separately, and I decided to look inside the cane field. Because of coming late, I did not have a gun. Jack and Jim had the two shotguns, Richard (a teenager) had a .22 rifle, and Archie and I had nothing. As I started off Jack handed me his shotgun loaded with buckshot, saying I should not go inside the cane without a gun. Richard gave Jack his .22. I took Jack's gun and the two dogs and went into the cane, saying that either I would get the tiger or the tiger would get me, little realizing the truth of my prophecy.

The cane field was seven or eight acres, and when planting it we had left four-foot unplanted strips every fifty feet or so to act as paths running through to the other side. The cane was ten feet or more tall and in places it was very thick, which made it seem as if I was walking between two walls of cane. In some places it had fallen across the lane so that at times I could not walk upright and had to crawl through the fallen, tangled stalks. I started down one of the lanes, and got through to the other side of the field without anything happening and searched along the far side. Finding no sign of the tiger, I started back to join the others. The dogs were going along in front, apparently quite sure there was no danger. When we were approaching the place I had left the others, I heard a loud snarl followed by a crashing in the cane well off to my left front. Then Jack shouted from that direction, saying he had disturbed the tiger and it was coming my way.

I was on the alert, and the dogs kept close to me. I was very glad of this because I thought they would give me warning if we came close to the tiger without my knowing it, but we had not gone very much farther when suddenly the tiger appeared on my left. It looked huge facing me at about ten yards distance, and the way it was switching its tail showed that it was angry. It was plain that it intended to spring on me, and

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5.

I had no choice but to shoot. I knew that an LG shot from my 12-bore might just manage to stop the tiger but would not kill it, so I fired straight at its forehead and ran for my life.

As the sound of the shot died away I could hear a terrific growling and snarling, and the tiger crashed after me. I had run only about ten feet when it was at my left shoulder, and I had to stop to fire again. The barrels of my gun poked the tiger as I swung around and fired, and it grabbed my left shoulder in its teeth and knocked me to the ground face down. I fought the tiger as it kept on growling and trying to crush my skull between its powerful jaws. The thick criss-crossed stalks of cane I lay among hindered the tiger somewhat. I started yelling as loud as I could to the others that the tiger had caught me so they would know what had happened and wouldn't try to come too close. All the time I was shouting the tiger was biting my head, and the pain of its chewing counteracted the pain in my torn and dislocated shoulder.

After two or three minutes the tiger unaccountably left me and moved off into the cane. I lay still and listened intently but could hear nothing but the dry cane leaves rustling around me. I cautiously lifted my bleeding head and looked around. There was no tiger and no growling or snarling, only the smell of the tiger remained. I hoped the tiger was dying. Now, I thought, was the time to run. If I could just get out of the cane into the open, the others would know what to do. I got up without putting any pressure on my injured shoulder and started to run.

Immediately there was another shattering growl and crashing in the cane. I hadn't taken four strides until I felt my head being caught in the tiger's mouth, and then I found myself flat on my stomach among the cane stalks with the tiger on top of me. Again it began gnawing at my

6.

head, its teeth grating on my skull. Twice I heard and felt bone being splintered near my right ear, and blood gushed over my face as my left ear was bitten in two. I was nearly crushed by that quarter of a ton of tiger as it lay full-length on me.

We lay like this for about ten minutes while the tiger made a sort of purring sound. Once it released my head and licked its lips. I will never forget the horrible fetid stench of that tiger's mouth. At last the tiger stopped chewing and just held my head down with its open mouth. This strange behaviour, added to the fact that my skull was not completely crushed, probably meant that one of our shots had hit the tiger in the mouth and had perhaps broken its jaw.

Surprisingly the tiger did not claw me. Once I started to push my right hand under my chest toward my left shoulder to see if I could ease the pain a bit, and the tiger, feeling the movement, pricked me with its claws as a warning. I stopped moving at once. After that I lay perfectly still. The stink of tiger and blood together was sickening, but there was nothing I could do about it.

The tension of waiting for something to happen was getting too much to bear. I gave up all hope of escaping alive and began to wish the tiger would sink its fangs into my neck and end it all. I pictured the grief of my wife and children when they heard what had happened, and thought about all the police investigations and inquiries that would face my family and friends and regretted that I would be the cause of so much worry and trouble to them.

Suddenly I remembered about prayer. It was as if someone asked me, "Why don't you pray?" It came to me so clearly that I immediately asked God to deliver me from this tiger, just as I had always asked His help in the difficulties and hardships of daily living. I could hear the dogs

giving an occasional bark at a distance and the thought occurred to me that I could whistle to them and they might come near and distract the tiger. As I expected, the whistling did not annoy the tiger, but the dogs did not come. I had just given up whistling as useless when I heard two shots. At once the tiger left me and rushed off in the direction of the shots.

When I felt the tiger's weight gone off me, I knew my prayer was answered. Relief flowed through me, but I did not attempt to move until I heard Jim calling and walking through the cane toward me. I answered so he knew I was in my right senses. He said, "Come on, Francis, let's get out of this cane." A bit of my brain was oozing out of a hole in my right temple, and he pushed it back in. He pulled off his undervest with the idea of soaking it in the watercourse so that he could squeeze some water into my mouth and then wrap the wet vest around my head. I asked if they had sent for the Land Rover, and he said they had. Then he helped me to my feet and supported me as we pushed our way out of the cane to the edge of the jungle, where he set me down under a wild fig tree to wait while he went back into the cane to get my gun. I sat there with blood pouring from my wounds. My head had more of a burning feeling in it than real pain, but my shoulder ached without a stop.

I found out later from Jack what had happened to the others. Jack had found an enormous pug mark just inside the cane. He was staring hard at it, bent right down, when he heard a "whoof" and off went the tiger from very near at hand. It must have been lying about ten yards from where Jack stood.

"When the tiger gave that yell," Jack recalled with a laugh, "my blood turned to ice and I gave another yell and nearly fell backwards. I got out of there as fast as I could. Richard and Archie jumped over

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the fence and went as fast as they could to find a tree. Jim was giggling at us from behind a tree. He came over to me and asked what had happened. As I was telling him we heard Francis's two shots close together."

"The noise Francis made then was not nice to hear," continued Jack soberly. "I did not even know what it was. It sounded like a goat that was caught. Jim recognized it for what it was. He said, 'I think Francis has had it,' and started along the edge of the cane. We could hear the tiger growling, and then we heard Francis shout, 'Don't come; the tiger has caught me.' Richard began begging, 'Do something Jacky, do something Uncle Jim,' but we didn't know what to do.

"We could hear the cane shaking and rustling, Francis moaning, the low growling of the tiger, and an occasional bark from one of the dogs. Then we finally heard Francis whistling for the dogs, and Archie said, 'Jacky, fire a shot.' I fired two shots with the .22 into the air toward where Francis and the tiger were, hoping to distract the tiger's attention. It worked. The tiger left Francis and came toward us. We could see the cane getting pressed down with each leap he made in our direction. Jim had got behind a small wild fig tree to my left and could see the tiger very close to him, jumping up again and again looking over the top of the cane for us. Jim is an experienced hunter with several tiger kills to his credit, and he took careful aim and shot the tiger in the chest. It growled and dashed off into the cane and then all was quiet.

"Jim began searching for Francis, and I asked Archie to go and bring the Land Rover or the tractor, but he said he had no strength at all and could not budge from where he was. He and young Richard, thinking to escape if the tiger came their way, had climbed up a small tree and were sitting there shivering, white of face, about ten feet off the ground. Our bicycle was there under the kher tree, so I left the .22 with Richard and cycled as fast as I could to the farm, which was about a mile away,

and got two of the men, Donald (Archie's brother) and Arthur (Richard's father), to bring the Land Rover. We drove as fast as we could, but when we got about twenty-five yards from the place where Francis was, the engine stalled. I ran over to Francis under the fig tree and saw that he was in a dreadful condition, nearly unconscious, with blood all over him and his clothes all torn.

"The tiger made one more attempt to get one of us when Jim went back into the cane to get the gun Francis had dropped. He was moving aside the cane leaves with his gun and making quite a bit of noise, when he heard the tiger growling and coming and could see it parting the cane as it came. Jim ran out of the cane and stood in front of the Land Rover, with one cartridge in his gun, waiting for the tiger. It rushed after him but did not have enough strength to get through the tangled cane at the edge of the field. That saved him," concluded Jack.

I was sitting half alive under the fig tree, but when I heard that awful growl again, I somehow got new life into me. I managed to get to my feet and started running into the jungle, expecting to drop any minute from weakness. I had to hold my left arm against my chest with my other arm because of the agonizing jerk on the shoulder with each step. It was a great relief when I realized Jack had come and was helping me. I could not bear a touch on my arm, but he kept his finger pressed against a hole in the side of my neck from which blood was spurting. He helped me through the watercourse and up the other bank which was about ten feet high to our wheat field on the other side. That run we made was about a hundred yards. I lay full length on the grass while Jack went to help start the stalled Land Rover.

It gave a lot of trouble, but after much silent prayer they managed to get it started and drove across to where I lay. They put the seats down and helped me inside. Jack sat and held me, and his clothes and

hands became covered with blood. I tried to make myself sound as cheerful as possible so that everyone wouldn't get too excited and worried. Jim went to call Douglas, our Farm Manager, and to inform my family and the other people at home, and we started off to the nearest doctor.

Once I was in the car and it started moving, the tension left me and I could relax. Only then I realized how exhausted I was, but I kept my senses and knew when we got out of the farm onto the public road. When we stopped I recognized a friend of ours looking in at me. At the hospital I asked for water, but as they had put a touch of brandy in it, I refused it as I did not know what might happen if I drank brandy after losing so much blood. Then I must have lost consciousness, because the next thing I knew they were wheeling me out of the hospital to an ambulance, and my wife, small son and two daughters, and all the people from our farm were there to see me off.

I learned afterward that the local doctor had not wanted to touch the case at first because he was certain I would not live. In fact, for a while I was thought to be dead. My pulse actually completely disappeared, but after Jack donated blood for a transfusion, it came back. They cut off my clothes and gave me what first aid they could. About 5 p.m. they sent me by ambulance to the Bareilly hospital about seventy miles away, having telephoned ahead for them to be ready for an emergency case with the right type of blood on hand.

I spent many weeks in the hospital. My people said that if I hadn't been so tough I would never have lived to reach the doctor. I was a mess. There was a large hole in my skull above my ear, a gash in my chin, and one ear was bitten through; my arm was badly chewed, my shoulder was dislocated, and my upper back, shoulder, and upper chest muscles were deeply lacerated by the tiger's huge canine teeth. My recovery was a miracle.

11.

A lot of people prayed for me. My arm became more or less paralyzed, but through ceaseless exercise I have regained the use of it, and I can now carry two buckets of water from our spring to the kitchen. The tiger's teeth punched a piece of bone into my brain and an operation was performed to ease the pressure, but I am still unable to do anything like chopping wood that jerks my head. In the two and a half years since these injuries occurred, I have been troubled with dizziness and several black-outs, and another brain operation may be necessary.

There was tiger's hair on the sights of my gun when it was brought in. We never found the tiger, but it is extremely doubtful that it could have lived with two shots in the face and a very close up shot in the chest. The cane field was thoroughly searched that evening and during the next three days. A heavy truck was driven around in the field, and a hunting elephant was taken in and out. The elephant's mahout, an experienced tiger-hunter, came back to the field on the elephant the very first night, ostensibly to get some cane for its feed which we had promised him. It is unbelievable that anyone of this mahout's experience would have risked such a venture in the night unless he was certain that the tiger was dead. It is believed that he recovered the tiger that night for the sake of its valuable skin. It is rumored that he has done this sort of thing on more than one occasion in the past.

That day I was wearing two lapel pins with mottoes on them, "Jesus Saves" and "Christ Died for Us." After the cane was cut and the field burned off, the empty cartridge was found where Jack had shot the deer, and my two lapel pins were found where they had fallen off my clothes during my struggle with the tiger. I treasure these pins and wear them to this day.