

True Tiger stories

By Alfred Leclair – Date unknown

Edited by Doric Steevensz – June 2017

Paney is a small port on the East coast of Sumatra at the mouth of the Bila river. After four hours by launch up this river there is a rubber estate called 'Senna' and a further five hours away there is another estate called 'Pangkattan'. This estate is the limit of the navigableness of the river. Any European with legitimate necessity may obtain a lift from Paney in one of the biweekly launches of that estate. From there upward one has to travel by Malay boat impelled by poles requiring twelve hours to reach a small village called Rantau Prapat. A further three hours away from there lived a Dutchman, the only white inhabitant in the whole of this vast territory of virgin jungle. He had his own small coconut plantation with still immature plants. The reason for his apparent passion for solitude was that a railway line had been traced to join North Sumatra to Central Sumatra. So he applied for land in the vicinity which should, in due course, acquire quite a high value.

In one of my hunting trips I met the man fishing in the river. He only spoke Dutch and I had not yet acquired that language so we spoke in Malay. His name was Brunier and he invited me for the night. He explained how in a few years the railroad having been completed, his product and his land will enhance in value, to such an extent that he will be a rich man. He spoke in such a convincing manner and with so much enthusiasm that I was eventually persuaded to do the same. After having inspected various part of the district I decided on an area on the other side of the river and adjacent to it.

The manual clearing of this piece of land, consisting of dense and huge trees, would be frightfully expensive, especially the hiring of local free labourers. In view however of the very suitable type of soil for rubber and the extensive quantity of humus which will exclude the necessity of manuring with fertilizers, I decided the expenditure was justified. I had worked out that the area I could plant with my capital of 5 000 pounds sterling was an estimated £ 60 per hectare (2,47 acres) for felling, burning and clearing roots and the smaller stumps, lining and planting and making nurseries for 25 000 seedlings plus £ 300 per year for upkeep to maturity or £ 1350 for the four and half year needed and further £ 400 to put up rough dwellings, I found that I could open and plant up 50 HA for a total cost of £ 4 750. The rubber at that time (1910) fetched 4 shilling per pound and with a production of 1 200 to 1 500 lbs. per HA per year the gross revenue would be £ 13 500 or say £ 10 000 net. Unfortunately things did not turn out as per prevision but of this more later.

With the help of Brunier I made an application to the Sultan for that amount of land; the 'grant' delivered cost me altogether £ 60 and that day I sent in my resignation to my employers. I transferred myself to upper Bila into a one room hut built on posts four meters high belonging to Brunier; 200 meters from his own dwelling which was already too small for his own family of five children from his native woman, All dwellings are built to the same height to prevent uninvited tigers from calling. Tigers were the plague of the district allured by myriad of wild-pigs, deer, chevrotains etc., in small paths through the jungle particularly the path leading to Rantau-Prapat you could not put a foot down but on impression of tigers' paws, going down the village I had my footprints on them, coming back some hours later tigers had walked on my prints, once I saw young grass on which a tiger had treaded actually rising from its bent position, that tiger was only a few yards in front of me but owing to the zigzagging of the path it was impossible to see much ahead.

Between my dwelling and Brunier's there was a cow-shed; the walls were built of posts sunk in the ground for sturdiness. One evening I saw a tiger walking round and looking at the shed, by the time I got there with my gun he was away and I went and told Brunier about it, he said good tonight we'll get him. He had half a dozen tiger traps and together we laid one at the back of the shed and sprung it. This is usually done with a horse-shoe instrument with a long threaded rod screwed into one of the top end, each is pressed down alternatively by screwing the rod until the locking device is reached, the platform in the centre of the trap is hooked and the locking devices are released.

Brunier had no such tool and instead a pole was used with one man at each end to press and lock the springs, first one then the other.

At 2 a.m. the backing of my dog woke me up and I heard a mournful sound something like "too hoom, too loom" coming from distance, I opened a small window made inside the wall of bamboo and listened carefully trying to figure out what it could be. It came from the cow-shed, then, brought by a gust of wind, I heard distinctly "tuan tolong" (mister help). Brunier was asking for my help, he had no doubt been attacked and wounded by a tiger. I caught hold of my double-barrelled-gun and a flash light; I was down the ladder in a trice and ran towards the shed. Brunier was in the trap! Or at least he had one leg in the trap and lay on his back on the ground. I rushed to get a bucket from the shed and lifted him so that he could seat on it. He told me he had heard the tiger had been caught and he would shoot it at once (many tigers have got out of traps) his flash-light was very poor and he was so intensely occupied looking ahead to spot the tiger that he failed to remember the exact place where the trap had been laid with the result that he put a foot on the platform. There was of course no tiger. What he had heard were his cows disturbed by some small animal.

I could not open the trap alone, I would call his two men but he said that last night had been pay day and they had both gone to the village and to call his wife instead. I handed him his gun which had dropped away from his reach and went to call her. She was game enough but had not the weight required we could press a spring to very near the lock but could not quite reach it and had to give it up. I waited beside him till daylight, 5:30 am. and started for the village to get help but half way down I met his two men coming back complete with family. I explained the accident and sent one man to call the medicine witch. We duly locked, both springs down and carefully withdrew the two jaws apart; two of the prongs had penetrated right through the calf one on each side of the bone without touching it. The bone was not broken, a marvel (the prongs are the size of a small finger and two inches long). By the time we had him in bed the medicine man had arrived and thanks to his wonderful herbs and juice of roots Brunier was again on his feet after about ten days.

After having given out on contract the felling of the jungle and the work was already well under way I had to go down to Paney to replenish my monetary requirement. The moon would be up by 10 p.m. (no travelling on the river without moon) and the trip would nicely allow me to catch the Pangkatttan launch starting for Paney the next morning. A place to sleep complete with mosquito-net had been prepared for me in the Malay boat which as usual had a crew of six, two paddling, one steering and three resting. They change over every hour or so and there is no stopping either paddling down or poling up except when food had to be cooked. I had given my rifle to Brunier for safe keeping as well as the necessary aliment to feed my dog in my absence. At 9 pm. I took my gun along (very useful particularly for 'feathered and small game on the way up and went to sleep in the boat. Just when the moon was due to appear a terrific storm came down. I said to the men, no trip tonight, and rushed home but by the time I got in I was soaked to the bones. I changed and went to sleep. In the middle of the night the barking of my dog woke me up again, the moon was shining as it can shine on the Equator and I saw the dog on his belly looking down between the laths and furiously barking (floors are made of 2" laths with a space of 1" between each). I looked down and saw a tiger under the dwelling looking up towards us. I rushed for my gun but it was not at its usual place!! I had

forgotten it in the bout. I lighted some matches and dropped them one after the other between the laths but none reach the ground alight. However seeing no hopes of getting hold of my dog the tiger majestically worked out and disappeared. In the eight months I occupied this hut this was the only time I could have got a tiger from ay bed so to speak. Had that one the sense of knowing that I had no fire-arms that right?

A germinating bed and nurseries were prepared and at seeding season I purchased 25 000 seeds from Pangkattan Estate and laid them out. Actually only 13 300 are required for planting 50 ha at a distance of 20X20' but seeds do not all germinate and again spares must be available for supplies.

One morning I discovered havoc in the germinating bed, dozens of pigs had been at it, only the shells of the seeds were left (pigs are very fond of rubber seeds, they crack the shell and eat the pulp). I had to obtain another lot but this time the bed and the nurseries were fenced to a height of 4'. Germination is obtained after 10 to 15 days then transplanted into the nurseries.

All the seedlings were growing beautifully, two branches with two leaves to each were out after one month then one deer got in, he nibbled the top and leaves of hundreds of seedlings, then more deer, chevrotains and antelopes jumped the fence to feed on the seedlings, without counting those broken by trampling, I have counted 2 200 destroyed in one night. I had to put a higher fence, a quite expensive item to fence 2 acres with poles 4 to 5' diameter and 7' high. However to counteract this misfortune the burning was a great success thereby causing the other work to be cheaper than estimated. Huts were constructed to house the men I required for the preparation of land including planting. For this, I employed 20 Bataks, the former cannibals of Sumatra, they are very good workers compared with the lazy Malays. A dwelling was also erected for myself. After the completion of the planting, which owing to shortage of first class material due to the original spoiling by deer I had to finish with poorly developed plants, I discharged 10 men and kept the other 10 for upkeep.

Three months later when leaves had again developed on the stumps (the heads of small rubber trees in the nurseries are slashed off leaving a stump of 2,5' high for transplanting) the fun started. Every conceivable type of forest-game including tigers had apparently, made the area a rendezvous they contented themselves with nibbling the top shoots and eating the leaves but the pigs denuded the young trees of bark at the bottom and the tigers of course case for the pigs (the speed of a deer in the open is his security against tigers) I do not recollect the number of deer and chevrotains I have shot at night with a flashlight; these animals just stand looking at the flashlight and their eyes are like two icicle oil lamps, but there was always plenty of meat for the Bataks. The Malays do not eat an animal shot dead as it is against the Islamic religion. However I do remember that altogether 5 tigers were caught either in iron or box traps. I could not afford to fence 123 acres high and strong enough to stop deer and pigs so that every night more damage was done to the plantation.

To crown matters I got blood poisoning, the natives said it was due to my pulling out from my body what they call the horse -leech instead of applying quid juice, when in the forest they always keep a quid of tobacco in their mouth for that purpose. Not only the leech drop at once but it is also a disinfectant. These leeches live in swamps and when full of flood they are the size of a Hamburger and 10" long. The medicine man had a brew for this but my unbelief in ghosts and evil spirits was the cause of the reverse action and the whole of my body started to tumefy. Arrangements were made for ay transportation to the Medan hospital (the capital of Sumatra East—Coast) by Malay boat to Pangkatttan Estate, by launch to Paney, by ship to Tandjong-Balei (a port on the Asahan river and terminal of the East-Coast railway) and lastly in a Red-Cross wagon to Medan. I was two months in the hospital. The costs of doctors, hospital, medicines and my transport from Upper Bila to Medan cleaned out my bank balance and I had to look for a job. I was employed by a big British firm for one of their plantations, first as factory-engineer then as field assistant and finally as Estate Manager for

twenty eight years. Before leaving Upper-Bila I hats, asked Brunier to look after my place and had handed him enough cash to pay my ton workers for 5 months.

Thereafter each month regularly I sent to Brunier an amount largely sufficient to cover the salaries of my workers. For the Ramadan(Moslem now year), that is ten months after commencing with my new job, there were three days holidays when the factory will close for that period and I decided to make a trip to Upper-Bila by road. I had then a 4 200 c.c. 6 cyl. Maxwell (a defunct American make) and with little luck I could reach a place 180 miles away called "Marbau" with only a further 25 miles walk to my plantation. The car was carefully prepared for the trip and loaded up with every conceivable item likely required for the journey such as a good supply of rope to wind round the back wheels in muddy stretches, shovels to dig the car out of mud, plenty of petrol and oil (no pump station available) plenty tools, tyre repair kit, spare carbide for the head lamps, spare flashlight cells etc. etc. I did not intend to carry

A rifle on the walking journey so I went to a friend to borrow his revolver but he was out and his servant said it was locked up in a wardrobe, then I went to another friend and got his, when I returned home the first friend had sent his servant to hand me his revolver so that I had now two of them.

As soon as the factory had completed the day's crop at 9 pm I was off with one servant and a gardener. Over and above the two revolvers I also took my rifle, I reached Marbau at 7 am the last part of the journey was a horrible nightmare. There were two rivers to cross on ferries of fortune, after the second river still 20 miles from Marbau the road was nothing more than a bullock-cart tract and as this happened to be the rainy season (I had already driven in a heavy rain for about two hours) the tract was flooded and the whole way was a sea of mud. Every 3 or 4 miles the ropes on the back tyres (I had first put them whilst on the second ferry) would be torn off and new ones had to be wound round. The car all the way on second gear was axle deep in the mud and the front axle was acting like a bull-dozer, every time the back wheels started spinning we had to clear the mount of mud assembled in front of the axle.

In Marbau I engaged two Malays to accompany me on the walking journey. I left the car and its content in the care of my two men. We started at 9 am and arrived at my place without incidents at 7 pm, a very poor show due to the Malays always wanting to rest. Judge of ay disappointment when I found all buildings empty and in a dilapidated state and even the scarce furniture in my own dwelling removed. As it was dark I could see nothing of the state of the plantation but I had a feeling that upkeep was not what I had expected. The only thing I could do now was to carry on to Brunier's but there were no boats on this side of the river and we had to shout for half an hour before someone came in a boat. Brunier said that owing to tigers prowling around the every night the men were frightened and refused to stay there alone; therefore he had them built a shed on his place and transferred them there, a very plausible but doubtful excuse. I asked when did that happened, he said "oh a couple months after you left". I said: "very extraordinary you did not write me anything to that effect". He said "I wrote it to you maybe the letter went astray if you did not receive it". A very poor excuse yet I could not afford to tell him to his face and being very tired I took a little nourishment and went to sleep on a bench with just my shoes off.

The next morning I wanted to start early for the inspection and to see my 10 men at work but Brunier informed me that two days ago four of them had asked for a week leave to visit their family two days walk across the mountains and that two more had gone to Rantau-Prapat last night to do some shopping and would be back round about 8 am. I asked him to come along but he said he had a bad knee and could not walk. I could smell bad medicine but what could I do. I crossed the river with four men only out of the ten I had been paying regularly. I found the whole area in a very bad state of

upkeep, big patches of "lalang" were present (a grass impoverishing the soil to such an extent that nothing else can grow and will completely starve a rubber tree) about half of the young rubber trees had been so much damaged by deer and pigs that they could never reach maturity and a good many others would require 6 to 7 years to do so. The others which had already reached a height where the deer could no more reach the top shoot were beautiful enough and a mixture of white-wash and arsenate could be painted on the stem to stop the pigs from damaging the bark but as a whole the plantation was a wash-out. I kept the four men at it the whole day clearing out some of the lalang but the other two men did not turn up.

In the evening I returned to Brunier's and to my surprise found the two men had just returned. I spoke of my disappointment to have found the plantation in such a bad state, Brunier had all kind of excuses however I told him that I found coming by road was so easy that in future I would come every month and pay the men myself. He tried for a while to dissuade me from doing so but seeing that I was firm in my decision he said it was a very good idea. That night I slept again on my bench and next morning I arranged that four men should come with me to work on the plantation and the other two would come to me at midday when the three of us would start for Marbau. These two Bataks were much stronger walkers than the lazy Malays and the journey was done in exactly 8 hours. On the way I inquired why the other four men had left and when, they said one man had his salary cut four days when he had fever and did not agree.

So he resigned and as the other three men were of the same village he enticed them to do the same and that was about six months. They further said that Brunier had told them that he had purchased my place they therefore worked where they were told, more on his Coconut area than on my place. I could tell them how Brunier had been cheating me, bad for European prestige and I said, good, keep on carrying out his orders, knowing that since I told him I would come and pay the men myself he would not dare to do me down as in the past. I certainly had no intentions of making that horrible trip in a hurry and I could not see yet how I would settle the matter.

After having filled up petrol oil and carbide I left Marbau for the return journey at 9 pm. I had of course the same difficulties to reach the first river. Three hours to do 20 miles. The ferry was the other side and the three of us shouted for the ferry-man who had a hut near the landing. He came out eventually and we made out that he said the river was too high and too swift and that we shall have to wait for the water to recede. I said nothing doing, I have to cross now, bring the ferry along; he said it was impossible and he re-entered his hut. I took a revolver and pulled the trigger but nothing happened all the five cartridges were duds, I took the other one but only the last cartridge responded the other four were also duds. Then I got hold of my rifle and at first I was shooting in the air but as this had no effect I started to shoot in the top of the plank wall of the hut, this brought the man out quick enough and I said bring the ferry along or I shoot you. He got on and began to poll up the river along the bank.

He went so far that I had an idea he was running away but he suddenly turned making for our side, when the river became too deep for his poll he used it as an oar and when he got in the centre the strong current swiftly drifted the ferry down and it was still 15 feet from our bank when it got to our level, the man threw us a rope which I caught and the three of us pulled the ferry to the landing. The man now tried to dissuade me to cross. He said last year a car went to the bottom when the ferry struck the bank after missing the landing. I said I'll take the responsibility come on let's load the car. The four of us polled up the river for a good distance then we aimed at the other bank using our polls as oars, when I saw we would not make the landing I got hold of the end of a rope, told the man to fasten the other end to the ferry and I dived into the river fully dressed and with my boots on I made the landing and gave the rope a half of a turn around one of the posts of the landing, pulled all the slack and as the rope began to stretch I allowed it to slip to soften the strain and when the ferry was

finally stopped I fasten the rope and told the men to pull and eventually safely landed the car. It was now 1:50 am and still had 160 miles to do. The first 50 miles of road was poor and averaged only 50 miles per hour but the rest was good and I kept the good old "Maxwell" at a steady 60 miles. I got home and had time for a quick change of the wet clothes I was still in, plus a cup of coffee and I was at the Factory on the dot i.e. 6 am.

About ten days later I had a visit from the brother of the Sultan of Bila, he said he was on his way to Medan for an interview with the Resident of Sumatra and asked me how my plantation was getting on, I said bad, my men did not work properly and I was absolutely at a loss to know what I could do about it. I said I would sell the Concession for £ 500,- if I could find a buyer. He said, no... you would not do that surely. I said, I would, I was disgusted with the whole busyness. He said now, if this is the case here is the money I was amazed and aghast at the figure I had quoted him but could now not retract my words but I said you will have to pay my men up to date and also pay for the costs of the transfer of the Concession. He said certainly end as I could see no way out of it I handed him the Deeds with a letter of sale. He then said he was prepared to pay much more for it but since I was satisfied with £ 500 there was no reason why he should offer more. And this is how my planting adventure cost ne nearly £ 5.000,-. (Above figures were ail in Guilders converted into pound sterling).

When I handed back the revolvers to their respective owners, I told them of my feeling of security when walking at night across the tiger infected jungle, at every suspect noise I had both weapons in my hands but I had no occasions to use them. I was very fortunate indeed: look at your bullets.