

THE MYSTERY OF THE TIGER

PART ONE

The Opium-Den in Singapore

In the old quarter of Singapore there is a street with two slopes, which form a camel's hump. At the summit of that hump, among the leprous houses crushed against one another, there is a grossly-sculpted door, the upper part of which represents a feline face, and which, because of that emblem, is known as the Door of the Tiger.

One of the two slopes of the street descends toward an abandoned basin of the port, to which unusable sampans and half-dead junks are relegated, and at the spot where the hump-backed street ends on the narrow quay, a sharp stone emerges from the ground, named by the Chinese and Malay population the Shark's Tooth.

In truth, it is nowhere else but in that street, where the images of animals are everywhere, that I, the son of a dealer in stuffed beasts who had become an intrepid tamer of living ones, should have seen the first shadow of my astonishing destiny extending over my soul.

"It's at the Door of the Tiger," said Ali the Macassar, who knows the men of Singapore as perfectly as the forests of the archipelago, and who claims that the former are as savage as the latter, when I asked him to indicate the most colorful opium-den in the city to me. In the corrupt quarter that envelops the water of the old basin in decomposition like a leper's crown, there was, according to Ali the Macassar, only one unique point, one threshold to cross: the Door of the Tiger.

"The opium-den is worthy of the man who keeps it," he added. "There's a man for you."

The man was a wretched obsequious Chinaman, like all those I knew. He nearly broke himself in two in order to bow on seeing Europeans come through the Door of the Tiger.

Yes, I went through that door; I went up a sticky staircase, and I mingled with the most abject riffraff of Singapore, in order to please a fool, my cousin from Goa, who was making his fist business trip to the island and wanted, he said, to learn about everything—as if a fool by birth can ever learn anything.

Certainly, when I had penetrated into that low-ceilinged room in which the odor of opium mingled with a nauseating odor of human sweat, there was still time, and I should have obeyed my instinct. I should have rained down blows of my whip on the recumbent Malays and Chinese; I should have thrown them over the camel's hump and I should have threatened my stupid cousin with a similar correction. There would have been no risk. No one would have dared measure himself against me. They would all have fled the moment they recognized me.

Now, I had been recognized. As I went in, a voice pronounced: "That's Rafael Graaf, the famous animal-tamer." And it was the hint of admiration that I perceived in those syllables that attenuated my anger and my disgust for the fallen beings that I had just seen.

The whispers fell silent; I surprised in the heads of the extended smokers a few slight inclinations, a few fluttering eyelids marking surprise or respect, and I went meekly to lie down on a mat beside a little lamp, which the proprietor of the establishment indicated to me. For it is vanity that directs almost all of our actions. Then the events had to unfold, the characters had to appear.

Sometimes, when one reads a book, one finds the subject-matter summarized in a few lines at the beginning of the work, with an indication of the mystery that will occupy the mind throughout the

reading. In the same way, hazard often places at a beginning in life a synthetic scene in which the characters come together who are to influence you subsequently, and in which the enigma is posed that will make you live and die. The fool was only an instrument, the Door of the Tiger merely the threshold of a path, for it was necessary that the goal should be attained.

“Did you know that it was Buddhist monks who first brought opium to China?”

“I didn’t know that.”

“A treatise on morality whose translation goes back to the Tang dynasty affirms it. The same treatise attributes to Buddha himself the invention of the pipe and the method of preparing the poppy-juice.”

I burst into ostentatious laughter on hearing those stupid words murmured close at hand, and as the man who had spoken did not seem to perceive my hilarity, I guffawed again noisily and put an expression of lofty scorn on my face.

The man had only darted a single clear and profound glance at me, in which there was neither curiosity nor respect, and he resumed rolling a brown pellet with minute care, as if my presence not far away from him was of no importance.

The vague light of the lamp next to which he was stationed permitted me to see his features. He was neither Chinese nor Malay—perhaps Hindu. He expressed himself in English with a slight accent and a singsong quality in his voice. I thought on reflection, that that he was of the Mongol type, and I had a desire to pick a nasty quarrel with him, to stretch out my foot and kick him with it, or to throw my hat at the lamp and knock it over.

At that moment, however, my attention was distracted. I had the sensation that the face of a European woman sometimes loomed up at the back of the room. I thought I glimpsed large bright eyes full of a delight of curiosity and the delicate curve of an amber neck. A European woman in that dive—was it possible?

The man continued speaking, without paying any heed to me and I heard him say: “Men are all the more unhappy as they experience more hatred, and all the happier as they love more.”

And, replying to someone who as facing him and whom I had not heard, he added: “Yes, develop love in oneself. But it’s difficult. Opium, which is the intelligence of the vegetable kingdom, can help us in that. There are other plants and other secrets, but people don’t know them. In the same way that there are several qualities of thoughts, there are juices of herbs and roots with different properties.

“In Mexico, on the moisture of stones, grows the plant peyote, which gives clairvoyance of the future. In the forests of Siam, and there alone, one finds a red graminaceous plant that procures a trance state and aids the separation of the soul and the body. By means of opium, absorbed moderately, a man is set on the path where he discovers his relationship with the animal species. And there are also the grating of certain insects, and the song of certain birds, like the rohi-rohi,¹ in which, if we know how to listen, we can find information about means of self-development.”

My cousin was not smoking for the first time. I saw that by the skill with which he rolled the pellets of opium into cones, and the satisfaction that he allowed to spread over his face as he launched large puffs of smoke at the ceiling.

He held out a pipe to me. I shrugged my shoulders to signify that opium could not exert any effect on my robust temperament. But then he smiled maliciously and I thought that he was supposing internally that I feared some effect of the drug on the clarity of my ideas. I hastened to smoke the pipe that he held out to me. My aspirations were awkward, and my cousin’s smile remained malicious.

Now, nothing is as irritating as the smile of a fool.

I wanted to show that a man of my stripe is not modified by any absorption whatsoever, and I invited my cousin to prepare me a few successive pipes, which I aspired in a single draught, and from which I experienced neither pleasure nor displeasure.

“I prefer elephant-hunting in the forests of Borneo,” I said.

¹ All references to a bird identified by this name appear to originate from an account of travels in Oceania collected by Albert Montémont and published in 1836. He does not give sufficient detail for the modern name of the species to be determined with exactitude.

I had come back from a hunting trip to Celebes and Borneo, and I was a past master in the art of approaching an elephant and firing from a few paces away.

“The more intelligent an animal is,” I added, “the more pleasure there is in killing it.”

It was only because my mouth was dry that I did not spit in the direction of the Mongol, whose clear gaze I had sensed posed upon me. I contented myself with scratching myself forcefully and wrapping my alpaca jacket around me to show that I was apprehensive of the vermin that might be crawling on the bodies of my neighbors.

My cousin was really only interested in the various varieties of tortoiseshell in which his father traded in Goa. In spite of that, I listed a considerable number of my cynegetic exploits or him, suddenly being gripped by a desire for stories, a desire to be heard with admiration retracing dangerous adventures.

Time passed. I deliberately spoke loudly enough to trouble the tranquility of the other smokers. Some got up and left, without, however, daring to allow their discontentment to show. The European woman that I thought I had perceived in the gloom appeared again, with the same expression of gaiety and curiosity on her face. Several times I nearly called out to her, asking her to come and lay down beside me in order to show me how she was made—but ideas were crowding my brain in abundance, and I continued talking to my cousin, who was not listening to me.

The notion of time disappeared within me and the whole night went by like an instant under the low ceiling with the thick odor of opium, the odor of human beings and I know not what of pepper, putrefaction and spring coming through the open window from the port.

From the individual whose calm features were insupportable to me, I only heard one more phrase, which seemed to me to be devoid of importance:

“The old law of Manu says: the man who has killed a cat, a blue jay, a mongoose or a lizard must retire to the heart of the forest and devote his life to the beasts until he is purified.”

I did not know what the old law of Manu was, and did not care.

My soul was placid, all that was floating there, like a boat on a lake, was the necessity of offending that smoker with the Mongol face.

Now, as the air began to whiten by virtue of the approach of morning, a lizard, one of those domestic lizards that live in human houses, slid among the recumbent forms, slowly and fearlessly. It brushed me, and then drew away; and I saw it circling around the hateful smoker.

Then my early were struck by an imperceptible whistle. That whistle departed from the man’s lips, and the lizard, on hearing it, without being dazzled by the light of the lamp, drew closer to him, and I even saw a thin hand, a hand with excessively long fingers, whose form was singularly repugnant to me, caress the lizard’s head with a kind of amour.

The charmed beast circled another two or three times, came back to be caressed, and set forth again.

Like a spring, my foot extended. There was a slight crack. The tail of the crushed lizard made two or three spasms, and I experienced the plenitude procured by a necessary action that one has just accomplished.

I had to close my eyelids for a few seconds. When I opened them again, there was a lamp not far away, between two empty mats. The body of the lizard was no longer at the end of my foot. Someone had taken the little cadaver away.

I started to snigger.

“Perhaps that imbecile has taken it away to bury it.”

I shook my cousin.

He came out behind me, shivering. I had the sensation of laughter, as bright as a string of pears, resonating in the shadows and I thought I saw once again, as I crossed the threshold, the upper body of a woman rising up. But it was too late to pay any attention to it. Above all, I desired to breathe pure air.

Outside, the freshness was exquisite. A large torn sail was flapping at the bottom of the camel’s hump. The first cries of the agar-agar merchants were audible in the distance, in the side-streets. I stretched myself. I would have liked to fight someone. I lashed the air with my whip. A man should always carry a whip. The opium had definitely had no effect on me. How strong I was! What a joy I experienced in being alive!

The Cobra and the Toad

I have always been passionately fond of making animals suffer. As a child, I tore the wings off flies and made them walk across the sand of the verandah where I was playing. At ten, I made myself a bow with sharp arrows made of sandalwood, with which I targeted oxen and dogs, which fled on seeing me as if at the sight of a redoubtable monster.

In those days, the island of Singapore was not yet entirely cultivated, as it is today, and the forest struggled there with the hastily-constructed cottages and the squares of tilled ground. It was in the confines of plantations, with a few boys of my own age, that I went forth to slake my thirst for animal death. Very quickly, I became skillful at shooting the bow, but it was when my father made me a present of a Devisme rifle that my veritable exploits began.²

I had obtained a prize for religious instruction and the pastor, who had just dined with us, had declared that although I was ignorant of everything else, I had an innate knowledge of God, which is the essential thing. For I had had, since the earliest age, a profound scorn for books and those who read them, a scorn that I have retained while advancing in life.

Experience has taught me that there are no intelligent and useful men except those who are rebels against education and turn all their faculties toward action.

I pride myself on having thrown on the dung-heap, as well as a Bible that I never opened, the few English and Portuguese books that lingered in our house. Never read anything! What a powerful force for the character! I prevented my employees from going in search of the *Malacca Chronicle* when it arrived on Sunday, and for my part, I had historic events related to me orally, notably the Sepoy revolt of 1857, in order not to be influenced myself by the stupidity of those who write.

The Devisme rifle was marvelous. I shot birds in flight and shattered the heads of serpents at a hundred paces. I received instruction from the best hunters in Singapore—who, I perceived later, knew nothing about hunting—and at the age of fifteen I lay in ambush with them on my first tiger hunt.

I can say that I am one of the most courageous of all the men it has been given to me to know. A courageous man can be recognized by the capacity he has for admitting the fears he has experienced. I have been afraid, to be sure, but I have said so, I have said it aloud, if not to others, which might have harmed me, at least to myself, which is the important thing. By virtue of that knowledge of my own fear, I have become courageous, and I have accomplished the exploits that had rendered me famous from Borneo to the coasts of Coromandel, and even further.

That was the time when the number of tigers was beginning to diminish on the island of Singapore. The Resident organized hunts continually, and as he was a friend of my father I was invited to them, and even became the principal actor. I remember that when the French warship *Amazonne* called in at the port, it was agreed during a dinner that each officer would shoot his tiger, and that it would be me, in spite of my youth, who would organize all the hunts.

All that is of no importance and I only say it for the record and in order to make known my extraordinary precocity for killing wild animals. I hasten to add that the French officers quit Singapore without having been able to fire a rifle-shot, and that it was only later that it was given to me to kill my first tiger. For those creature have such a prodigious ability to conceal themselves that even in places where they are abundant, like Malacca and Java, one can hunt them for a long time without ever encountering them, only to find oneself, one evening, face to face with one of them when one least expects it. But I shall talk about the mores of those mysterious creatures anyway, and the information I obtained from that acquaintance

The first tigers I saw were stuffed, in my father's warehouses. They were of all sizes and all provenances. There were black tigers from the Himalaya, which are called black although they are more

² The reference to a rifle made by the Parisian gunsmith Jean-Louis Devisme, who was active in the mid-19th century, and subsequent references in the chapter, including the one to the Indian Mutiny of 1857, establish that this part of the memoir refers to events in the early 1860s.

yellow than the others, because they are believed to be incarnations of a Hindu goddess who is black herself and is called, I believe, Kali.

There were those from Bengal, which have exactly fifteen black rings on their tails, on a white background, and those from Mongolia, which have exactly twelve rings on a yellow background.

There were those from Siam, which have elongated mouths, those from Malacca, which are gigantic, and those from Zanzibar, which are ridiculously small because they are not tigers but simple panthers disguised as tigers.

There were also all kinds of wild animals: crocodiles, snakes, Persian lions, hyenas, sometimes an anteater, and all the varieties of Asian birds of prey. They occupied an immense glazed gallery juxtaposed with our dwelling, which overlooked the garden.

I often looked at their silhouettes while playing, and I remember that an internal force obliged me to slip into the gallery to pluck out a feather here and there, poke a muzzle with a pointed stick, or tug an ear, to insult the impotent enemy.

The proprietor of a menagerie who owed money to my father died insolvent, and the latter inherited his animals and his equipment.

While the proceedings lasted, he spent much more money on the nourishment of the wild beasts and a young elephant than the value of his debt. The desire to recover the sums advanced gave him the idea of supplementing his commerce in skins and stuffed beasts with a commerce in living animals. The commencement of his large fortune dates from that.

In his immense gardens, which extended along the border of the Chinese quarter, he had a series of cages installed, before which, twice a year, when the boats from Macao and Shanghai arrived, filed the great Chinese merchants who supplied the menageries of China. For those people, who seem at first glance purely commercial and limited in their conceptions, have an extraordinary curiosity regarding all animal species, and I believe that the most curious zoological collections in the world are found in the homes of certain rich Mandarins of Canton and Peking. I note in passing that the greatest successes I have obtained in my exhibitions of wild animals were in the latter cities, and that has contributed greatly to proving to me the intelligence of the Chinese, which I had initially misunderstood.

It was soon necessary to transform the gardens completely. In addition to the cages there were aviaries, sheds, huts, ditches, hangars, pens, stables, habitations on piles in an artificial pond, and basins surrounded by trellises for the lizards. A kind of town was instructed, with its streets and its ramparts, its perches and its dovecots, where the dwellings were adapted to the character and mores of different inhabitants: mammals, pachyderms, solidungulates, plantigrades, bimanians, ruminants, herbivores and carnivores.

It was not long after those transformations that the terrible events occurred that contributed to augmenting my hatred for the beasts whose life and death made me rich.

My mother was a saint. All mothers are saints, in principle, but I believe that my mother were more so than the others. She was also Portuguese, and had been abducted at an early age by a long-haul captain.

That captain, a certain Pinto, who gave her the marks of an ardent amour, installed her in Singapore in a delightful villa in the English quarter and went to deliver various cargoes to Batavia and Madras. He never came back, and my mother never heard any further mention of him. After a year, desperate and penniless, she was wondering what would become of her when she met my father and married him. She knew a perfect happiness with him, but she could never forbid herself a naïve admiration for that Pinto, who disappeared so mysteriously. She often told me stories full of fantasy that she made up about him, and unwittingly communicated her admiration to me.

When I was older and was better able to understand things, my admiration for the seducer who had dared to take a young woman from Lisbon and deposit her in Singapore without any further concern for her changed to anger. I would have liked to meet him and have a word with him. But my mother, in the purity of her angelic soul, did not bear any grudge against him.

The sanctity of my mother was expressed physically by an extreme facility in blushing. She had conserved an extremely fair skin tone, which became rosy if anyone spoke to her a little abruptly.

That facility in blushing contributed more than a little to augment the great filial love I had for my mother. I had always considered that sanguine particularity as the external sign of a noble elevation of sentiments, which distinguishes the true elite. That sign is, however, very inconvenient for those who bear it. I received it from my mother, and in spite of the powerful tempering of my soul and the Asiatic sun that burned my skin, an unexpected remark was often sufficient to make the blood rise to me face.

My mother, in her sanctity, suffered from not participating sufficiently in the responsibilities of her husband's profession. She wanted to play a role in the education of the animals, and that was what doomed her, for one is doomed by one's virtue as surely as by one's folly.

A Malay having brought us a toad of unusual proportions, which came from the island of Komodo, where all the monstrous species are found, my mother, in her generosity, took it into her head to domesticate it.

As one ordinarily does, she began by making it hungry, and enclosed it in a long narrow jar. I had always heard talk of a kind of hateful projection emitted by the eyes of toads in certain cases, but I had never believed it. My mother was the victim of it. After three days, she went to see what had become of the toad at the bottom of its narrow jar. Neither my father nor I was there. It was a young Malay servant girl who told us what had happened.

Scarcely had my mother leaned over the jar than her pure face reflected an expression of unspeakable horror. Her entire body began to tremble. She stared at the toad as if she could not take her eyes away from it. The young Malay came running and was obliged to pull her from behind with all her strength in order to extract her from her contemplation. She died a few minutes later without having been able to pronounce a single word.

It is notable that the gibbons that filled a neighboring cage started chattering in a frightful fashion and gazing avidly into space as if at an invisible spectacle.

It is also notable that the toad died at the same time as my mother.

Our despair was immense. Neither my father nor I believed, at first, that the toad could have had anything to do with that inexplicable death, but Mr. Muhcin, an old Buddhist merchant who frequented our house, whose honesty was legendary in Singapore, and his wisdom recognized, affirmed to us that toads, when they have attained an extreme degree of fury, can transmit death via their gaze, especially when it is a matter of a delicate and defenseless creature like my mother.

Not all toads, he added, for there are hierarchies among the animals as there are among humans. There are those which command, those which obey, those which have penetrated certain secrets of nature, and those which are ignorant of them. And he launched into a theory that I found absurd at the time, and which concluded almost by glorifying the murderous toad. I only remained convinced that there are in nature occult things that surpass the human mind, and about which it is better not to think.

My mother was Catholic and my father Protestant, with the consequence that we were equally hospitable to the pastor, the French Jesuits of the mission of Bukit Timah, and also the pious Buddhists who are the elite of Malay society.

One is generally ignorant of the situation that one really occupies in the world. The interment of my mother revealed mine to me, and the purity of my grief was adulterated by an immense satisfaction of self-esteem.

All of Singapore attended that funeral mass. The Resident general was by our side, with the majority of the officers. I burst into sobs when I saw Captain MacNair,³ the director of the penitentiary colony, file past, followed by a delegation of Malabar and Lascar convicts in new uniforms.

Thus, evil accompanies good, and I recall that in coming back from the European cemetery, behind Battery Point, I was soothed by my importance and that of my family.

My father's faculties declined with an extreme rapidity. He started reading, and that was the origin of his decadence. One is doomed by one's folly as surely as by one's virtue. Not content with seeing the

³ Captain J. F. A. McNair was in charge of the penal colony in Singapore from 1858 until his retirement in 1870 (with the honorary rank of Major).

pastor, he began frequenting the Jesuits and certain Catholic priests assiduously. I even believe that he had conversations on the subject of I know not what religious theories with Mohammedans and Parsees.

There was friction between us. That was the time when I took cognizance of my power as a tamer, when I began to make wild beasts crawl with the fixity of my gaze and the whistle of my whip. Thoughts of vengeance were mingled with that. The son of the woman who had succumbed to the malign influence of a toad vanquished by his will the most redoubtable animals in creation. That thought of vengeance only increased when my father died.

He read too much. Troubled by his reading, morally debilitated by it, he allowed himself to be bitten by a cobra. Fatality dictated that neither the guaco plant nor naja fat, which are the antidotes to cobra venom, could be found. In a matter of hours, my father, who was a pure-blooded Dutchman, had taken on a leaden yellow tint what rendered him similar to a Malay of the old race. Nothing can be more painful for a son than to see his father change origin abruptly in the hour of his death.

The pomp of the funeral brought me no consolation. I knew who I was.

My character changed. When they presented themselves, I threw out the pastor, because of his citations from books, the Jesuits, because of their exaggerated politeness, and the Buddhists, because of their respect for the lives of animals. Men are few. It was at that moment that Ali the Macassar entered my household as an employee and became my companion. I no longer quit my whip. Even by night, it was within the reach of my hand.

But everything I have just said about the death of my parents is nothing. The duel had not begun. The true mystery had not yet enveloped me. It was only a year later that I was to encounter the Tiger. I am not talking about those with which the menagerie was full, but the unique one, mine, the one that was, by comparison with its peers, what I was myself with respect to men: the master.