

Inhabitants of the Jungle

By Elliott O'Donnell

Elephants, Lions, Tigers, etc.

Elephants undoubtedly possess the faculty of scenting spirits in a very marked degree. It is most difficult to get an elephant to pass a spot where any phantasm is known to appear. The big beast at once comes to a halt, trembles, trumpets, and turning round, can only be urged forward by the gentlest coaxing.

Jungles are full of the ghosts of slain men and animals, and afford more variety in hauntings than any other localities. The spirits of such cruel creatures as lions, tigers, leopards, are very much earth-bound, and may be seen or heard night after night haunting the sites of their former depredations.

The following case of a tiger ghost was narrated to me years ago by a gentleman whom I will style Mr. De Silva, P.W.D. I published his account in a popular weekly journal, as follows:—

The White Tiger

“Tap! tap! tap. Someone was coming behind me. I halted, and in the brilliant moon-light saw a figure hobbling along—first one thin leg, then the other, always with the same measured stride—accompanied with the same tapping of the stick. I had no wish for his company, though the road was lonely, and I feared the presence of tigers, so I hurried on, and the faster I went, the nearer he seemed to come. Tap! tap! tap! The man was blind and a leper, and so repulsively ugly that the niggers on the settlement regarded him with superstitious awe. I had a horror of tigers, but of lepers even greater. And I loved my wife with no ordinary love. So I hurried on, and he followed quickly after me.

“The night was brilliant, even more so, I thought, than was ordinary, and the very brilliancy made me fear, for my shadow, the shadow of the trees, shadows for which I had no name, flickered across the road, were lost to sight to return again, and the jungle was getting nearer. The open country on either side ceased, one by one tall blades of jungle grass shook their heads in the gentle breeze, and the silence of the darkness beyond began to make itself felt. A night bird whizzed past me, croaking out a dismal incantation from its black throat; something at which I did not care to look clattered from under a stone I loosened with my foot, and sped into the shade, and I hastened on.

“Tap! tap! tap! Faster and faster, and faster came the blind man. I could smell the oil on his body, hear his breathing.

“‘Whoever you are, sahib, stop!’

“There was fear in his voice as he whined out these words, a fear which increased my own but I pretended not to hear, and pressed on faster.

“The darkness grew; high over my head at either side of the road waved the grass, rustling to and fro, and singing to sleep the insects nestling on its green stalks with its old-time song of the jungle.

“The grass ahead of me slowly parted; my heart beat quicker, the tapping behind me ceased—it was only some small animal. What was it? A small hyaena? No. A jackal, a lame jackal, and it

looked at me from out of eyes that for some reason or other made me shiver. I did not know what there was about the jackal that was different from what I had seen in any other jackal, but there was something. And as I looked at it in awe, it vanished—melted into thin air.

“The moment after a second jackal appeared just where the other one had been standing, but there was nothing remarkable about this one, and on my bending down, pretending to look for a stone to throw at it, it slunk back silently and stealthily whence it had come, and I hurried on faster than ever, knowing a tiger was near at hand.

“Tap! tap! tap! I blessed the presence of the blind man.

“ ‘For God’s sake, sahib, stop! For the love of Allah, sahib, stop!’ (You know how they talk, O’Donnell.) ‘The jackals, did you see them I knew them by their smell, the smell of the living and of the dead. Walk with me, sahib, for Allah’s sake.’

“Presently, O’Donnell, I heard a heavier rustling in the grass than the wind makes a rustling that kept pace with me and went along by my side, never halting, but faster and faster, and faster.

“A short distance ahead of me was a patch of bright light, where the cross-roads met. A few yards more and the jungle grass would end.

“I thought of this, O’Donnell—the beggar might not know the road so well as I. He had no wife, no child; he was a leper, only a leper—and my teeth chattered.

“Here the Colonel paused and wiped his forehead.

“I slackened my speed, the rustling by any side slowing down, and the tapping grew faster. I was close to the whitened road.

“ ‘Sahib, the blessing of Allah be on you for stopping. Sahib, let me walk by your side.’

“(To the end of my days, O’Donnell, I shall never forgive myself, and yet I want you to understand it was for my wife—and child.) I slunk into the shade. Two steps more and the tapping would pass me. The stick struck the ground within one inch of my foot; my heart almost ceased to beat; I gazed in fascination at the spot in the jungle opposite. The heavy rustling had stopped; only the gentle sighing of the wind went on. The two steps were taken, the blind man paused on the cross-roads. He was ghastly in the moonlight. I shuddered. His eyes peered enquiringly round on all sides; he was looking for me; he had lost his way; he feared the tiger.

“Suddenly something huge shot like an arrow from the darkness opposite me. I bowed my head, O’Donnell, and muttered a prayer, for I thought my end had come.

A terrible scream rang out in the clear night air. I was saved.

“ ‘Allah curse you and yours, sahib.’

“I opened my eyes; an enormous tiger was bending over the leper, searching for the most convenient spot in his body to afford a tight grip.

“The man’s sightless eyes were turned towards the moon, his teeth shone white and even; with the striped horror purring in his face, he thought of vengeance on me.

“I dared not move. I could not pass, O’Donnell. I had no gun. The big brute found a nice place to catch hold. It opened its mouth so that I could see its glistening teeth. It looked down at its paws, where the cruel claws glittered, and they seemed to afford it keen satisfaction—it was a tigress and vain—then it lowered its head, and the leper shrieked. I watched it pick him up as if he were one of its cubs; saw the blood trickle down its soft white throat into the dusty road, and then it trotted gracefully away, and was lost in the darkness of the jungle. There was a deathlike silence after this. I waited a few minutes, and then I got up.

“I had only a short distance to go, and I no longer feared the presence of man-eaters—there was not likely to be another. Hours afterwards, O’Donnell, when I lay in my hammock as safe as a fortress, I fancied I heard the dead man’s cry, fancied I heard his curse. No one was more

devoted to a wife than I was to mine. Ours had been purely a love match, and it was against my wish that she had accompanied me to such an out-of-the-way place as Seconee. I told her about my adventure, suppressing the leper's curse; and I was glad I did so, as she was greatly distressed.

"Thank goodness you escaped, Charlie," she said. "I am so sorry for the poor leper. I suppose you couldn't have helped him."

"I might have fetched my rifle," I replied, and tried to rescue him, of course. But I fear it wouldn't have been of much avail, as he would have been badly mauled by then."

"My wife sighed. 'Ah, well,' she said, 'love is selfish! It makes one forget others. Still, I wouldn't have it otherwise.'

"I wish this railway job here was over," I murmured, sitting with my elbows on my knees and looking over the flat ground, sun-baked and barren, away towards the dark jungles and the still darker mountains towering above them and as I gazed a shadow seemed to blur my vision and a voice to whisper in my ears, 'Beware of my curse.'

"I took Cushai, one of the native servants, into confidence.

"Now, Cushai," I said, "you know all the superstitions of the country—the evil eye and the rest of them. Tell me, what can the dying curse of a leper do?"

"Cushai turned pale under his skin.

"Not of Nahra!" he stuttered, swinging the knife with which he had been cutting maize in his hand, 'not of Nahra, the leper of Futtebah. Sahib, if you were cursed by him, beware. He was learned in the black arts; he could heal ulcers by repeating a prayer, he could bring on fever.'

"At this, O'Donnell, I turned cold. I had lived long in India. I had seen their so-called juggling, had experienced also strange cases of telepathy, and knew quite sufficient of their intimacy with the supernatural elements to be afraid.

"You must keep the young sahib safe," Cushai said, 'and the white lady. I wish it hadn't been Nahra.'

"I took his advice. My boy, Eric, was more closely supervised than ever, and as to my wife, I begged and entreated her not to move from the house until the tiger was dead, and I searched for it everywhere.

"The dry season passed, the wet came, and my work still kept me in Seconee. At times there came to us rumours of the man-eater—of another victim—but it never visited our bungalow, where the bright rifle leaned against the wall waiting for it.

I certainly did meet with slight misfortunes, which the more timid might have put down to the working of the curse.

"My little finger was squashed in the laying down of a rail, and Eric had several bouts of sickness.

"It was nearly a year after the leper's death that alarming rumours of a man-eater having been at work again were spread about us. Several niggers were carried off or badly bitten and the wounded showed symptoms of the loathsome disease so well known and feared by us all—leprosy.

"I knew from that it must be the same tiger.

"The tiger is near," someone would cry out, and a stampede among the native workmen would ensue.

"Why the white tiger?" I asked Cushai.

“ ‘Because, sahib,’ he replied, ‘the leprosy has made it so! Tigers, like men, and all other animals, go white even to their hair. I have not told them the story, sahib; they only know it must have caught the leprosy. To them Nahra is still living.’

“Then, O’Donnell, when I thought of what was at stake, and of all the hideous possibilities the presence of this brute created, I took my rifle and went out to search for it. In the evenings, when the dark clouds from the mountains descended and the wind hissed through the jungle grass, I plodded along with no other companion than my Winchester repeater—searching, always searching for the damned tiger. I found it, O’Donnell, came upon it just as it was in the midst of a meal—dining off a native—and I shot it twice before it recovered from its astonishment at seeing me. The second shot took effect—I can swear to that, for I took particular note of the red splash of blood on its forehead where the bullet entered, and I went right up to it to make sure. As God is above us, no animal was more dead.

“ ‘The curse won’t come now, Cushai,’ I said, laughing. ‘I’ve killed the white tiger.’

“ ‘Killed the white tiger, sahib! Allah bless you for that!’ Cushai replied.

“ ‘But don’t laugh too soon. Nahra was a clever man, wonderfully clever; he did not speak empty words,’ and as his eyes wandered to the dark hills again I fancied a shadow darted along the sky, and the curse came back to my ears.

“ I was superintending the line one afternoon; the backs of the niggers were bending double under the burden of the great iron rods when I heard a terrible cry.

“ ‘The white tiger! the white tiger!’ Rods fell with a crash, spades followed suit, a chorus of shrieks filled the air, and legs scampered off in all directions. I was fifty yards from my rifle, and a huge creature was slowly approaching between it and me.

“I could hardly believe my eyes—the white tiger, the tiger I knew I had killed! Here it was! Here before me! The same in every detail, and yet in some strange, indefinable manner not the same. On it came, a huge patch of luminous white, noiselessly, stealthily—the mark of the bullet plainly visible on its big, flat forehead. Step by step it approached me, its paws no longer with the colouring of health, but dull and worn. And as it came, the cold shadow of desolation seemed to fall around it. Nothing stirred; there was no noise whatever, not even the sound of its feet crushing the loosened soil. On, on, on nearer, nearer and nearer.

“Shunned by all, avoided by its fellow-creatures of the jungle, a blight to all and everything, it drew in a line with me. Not once did its eyes meet mine, O’Donnell; not once did it glare at the natives who were hiding on the banks of the cutting; but it stole silently on its way with a something in its movements that left no doubt but that it was engaged in no casual venture. I remembered, O’Donnell, that my wife had promised to come with Eric to meet me along the cutting, as she was sure no tiger would be there. I ran as fast as I could, and yet somehow my feet seemed weighted down. I cursed my folly for not forbidding my wife to come.

“It was uphill till I got to the bend, and it might have been a mountain, it seemed so steep. I knew if the thing I had seen met them a little farther on, they would be cornered, as the cutting narrowed very much, leaving not more than twenty yards, and that was a generous estimate. At last, after what seemed an eternity, I reached the summit of the slope; the tiger was a mere speck along the line. I rushed after it as fast as I could go, stumbling, half falling, pulling myself together, and tearing on, and the faster I went the quicker moved the great white figure. A feeling of despair seized me; all my fondness for my wife became intensified tenfold, and was revealed to me then in its true nature; she was the one great tie that made life dear to me. Even my love for Eric paled away before the blinding affection I bore her. I tore madly on, shouting at the same time, anything to make the white tiger aware of my presence, to keep it from seeing her. Another

bend in the road hid it from view. The same hideous fears gripped me hard and fast, as I strained every muscle in the mad pursuit. At last I ran round the curve, and saw before me the tableau I had dreaded. The tiger was crouching, ready to spring on the group of three—Eva, Eric and the ayah. They were paralysed with fear, and stood on the rails staring at it, unable to move or utter a sound. I well understood their feelings, and knew they were labouring in their minds as to whether the thing that confronted them was a creature of flesh and blood, or what it was. They could not take their eyes off it, and, as a consequence, did not see me. The white tiger now went through a series of actions, so lifelike that I could not but believe it was real, and that I had been deceived in thinking I had killed it. Its haunches quivered, it got ready to spring, and my rifle flew to my shoulder. I saw it mark Eric, and read the increased agony in my wife's eyes. The critical moment came. Another second, and the thing, be it material or supernatural, would jump. I must fire at all costs. If mortal, I must kill it, if ghostly, the noise of my rifle might dematerialize it. And, as God is my judge, O'Donnell, at that moment I had not the least idea which of it was—tiger or phantom. It sprang—my brain reeled—my fingers grew numb, and as my wife suddenly bounded forward, the shadowy form of Nahra seemed to rise from the ground and mock me. With a supreme effort I jerked my finger back and fired. Bang! The sound of the explosion acted like a safety-valve to the pent-up feelings of all, and there was a chorus of shrieks. I rushed forward—the ayah lay on the ground, face downward and motionless. My wife had hold of Eric, who was shaking all over. Of the tiger there were no signs. It had completely vanished.

“ ‘Thank God,’ I exclaimed, kissing my wife feverishly. ‘Thank God! It was only a ghost! but it was very alarming, wasn't it?’

“ ‘Alarming!’ my wife gasped, ‘it was awful! I quite thought it was real! so did Eric, and so did’—then her eyes fell on the ayah, and she gave a great start. ‘Charlie!’ she cried, ‘for mercy's sake look at her! I dare not! Is she all right?’

“I turned the ayah over—she was dead! Fright had killed her!

“I then told my wife of the curse of Nahra, and of the phantom I thought I had seen of him, when the white tiger was springing. When I had finished, my wife hid her face in my shoulder.

“ ‘Charlie!’ she said, ‘I did something awful. I saw what I then took to be the real white tiger single out Eric, and in my anxiety to save him from the brute, I pushed the ayah in front of him. And the thing sprang on her instead. It was nothing short of murder! And yet—well, there were extenuating circumstances, weren't there?’

“ ‘Of course there were,’ I said—for I verily believed, O'Donnell, fear had, for the time being, turned her brain.

“On our way home she suddenly called my attention to Eric.

“ ‘Charlie,’ she cried, ‘what's that mark on his cheek? He's hurt!’

“I looked—and my heart turned sick within me. On the boy's cheek was a faint red scratch, just as might have been caused by a slight, very slight contact with some animal's claw.

“ ‘Sahib!’ Cushai whispered to me, when he saw it and heard of our adventure. ‘Sahib! Beware! Nahra was a clever man. He must have used the spirit of the white tiger as his tool. Let the medicine man examine the scar.’

“I did so. I took Eric to a Dr. Nicholson, who lived close by.

“He looked at the wound curiously for a few moments, and then said to me—he was renowned for his plain speaking—‘Mr. De Silva, there's no use beating about the bush, and prolonging the agony unnecessarily for you and your wife. The boy's got leprosy—God alone knows how! At the most he may live six weeks.’

“The shock, of course, was terrible. Eric had to be isolated from everyone—even from those who loved him best—and died within a month.

“ ‘Sahib, I knew!’ Cushai said to me the day of the funeral, ‘I knew some disaster would befall you. Nahra was a wonderful man, and his curse had to be fulfilled. You may rest assured, however, nothing further will befall you, for I saw Nahra in a vision this morning, and he told me both his and the white tiger’s spirit were now on friendly terms, and would trouble you no more.’

“My wife and I left the place at once, and for a long time I lived in a hell of suspense lest she should develop the infernal disease. By a merciful providence, however, she did no such thing, but, on the contrary, picked up in health in the most marvellous fashion; indeed, she only told me yesterday, she felt better than she had done for years. I’ve told you the story, O’Donnell—and it is true in every detail—because it goes a long way to substantiate your theory that animals, as well as human beings, have a future life.”

“I am absolutely sure they have!” I replied.

Jungle Animals and Psychic Faculties

It is, of course, impossible to say whether animals of the jungle possess psychic faculties, without putting them to the test, and this, for obvious reasons, is extremely difficult. But since I have found that such properties are possessed—in varying degree—by all animals I have tested, it seems only too probable that bears and tigers, and all beasts of prey, are similarly endowed.

It would be interesting to experiment with a beast of prey in a haunted locality; to observe to what extent it would be aware of the advent of the Unknown, and to note its behaviour in the actual presence of the phenomena.