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A DAY'S WORK ON A RUBBER ESTATE

IN THE MALAY STATES.

[By J. L. BATHGATE.]

"Tuan, T-u-a-n."

"Right, boy"; and I turn round on my bed, only half awake.

"Pukol anam betul, ayer teh sini, Tuan" ("It is 6 o'clock, tea is here, Master"). So I throw off my single rug covering, and proceed to dress in the semi-darkness, taking sips of tea and munching banana while doing so.

Suddenly the sun's rays dart up from behind the mountain range, and the pink tint gradually fades from the sky, but I have no time to waste on sunrises, as the muster horn has already been blown, and the coolies are mustering up in the valley below, where I can see hundreds of lights flitting about like fireflies, but they are merely the lights carried by the coolies to keep away evil spirits. When I arrived on the ground my English-speaking kranie (or overseer) had already begun to call over the names of the Indian coolies.

"Are all the coolies out this morning, Kranie?"

"Yes, sir; no, sir; I will tell you in a minute, sir"; and he goes on nervously calling over the names. In a few minutes they are finished, and the 110 odd coolies, each with two buckets, a tapping knife, and a small bag to hold his scrap rubber in, move off to their tapping fields.

Presently my kepala, or head Chinaman, makes his appearance.

"There are 32 men this morning, Tuan."

"Four short; why is that?"

"Fever, Tuan."

"Fever! No; too much samsue and fan-tan in the township last night."

"Perhaps, Tuan. They tell me fever, sick head, inside stomach very hot, no go round."

"Yes, that's samsue all right. Tell them to go up to the hospital."

"Very well, Tuan."

"And tell the other tappers to finish the sick men's work between them, and I'll give them the sick men's pay."

"Dresser!"

"Yes, sir"; and the English-speaking Cingalee estate hospital dresser steps forward.

"There are four of these Chinese tappers who have been on a bit of a bend last night. Give them some quinine and salts."

"Were there any rows in the coolie lines last night, Kranie? I heard a great deal of shouting and noise about 11 o'clock. I nearly came down to see what it was all about, only the noise stopped."

"Packerysamy got drunk on toddy (cocoa-

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nut brandy), came home and beat his wife, sir. Dorian and Abdulkader tried to stop him, but he drew a knife to them, so Dorian knocked him down with a stick and took it away from him."

"Well, Kranie, you tell Packerysamy that if I hear of him beating his wife again, or any more rows, I will see him personally, and I think he knows what that means. If it wasn't that both he and his wife were such good workers, I would kick him off the estate now. Anyway, cut his wages two dollars, Kranie," and I turn up the hill again to a light breakfast.

For the next few hours my attention was called to the tapping fields. Beginning my inspection with the Indian Tamil coolies, I found them already at work, each man at his own row of trees carefully paring off a thin sliver of bark from the edge of the cut made two days ago. One man is cutting right through the bark into the wood.

"Pattaram vettu ne ni" ("Cut carefully, you dog").

"I have a blunt knife, master."

"Well, sharpen it; do you expect me to sharpen it for you? You have a clever enough looking head on your shoulders. Use it, or I'll have to cut your wages. Do you understand?"

"Yes, master."

Being rather a dull morning, the milk is oozing out of the side cuts and running down the main channels into the tin cups in large quantities, which promises well for the month's return of dry rubber. A new coolie is being taught how to tap by one of the kanganyas or headmen, and is using his knife as an infant does a pen, gripped hard, and though cutting deep enough, he is not cutting straight.

"Cut straighter, my boy, like this," and I proceed to show him how. The knife slips, and I cut a big gash into the wood. "Yah!" the coolie ejaculates, and both he and the kangany, though looking at the tree with solemn faces, are trying to suppress their laughter, which may be seen by the quivering of their stomachs.

"No; not quite so deep as that," and I rectify my mistake. "You keep a sharp knife. See and always keep both yourself and it so, and you'll get on on this estate."

After spending about an hour in going through the Tamil rows, the Chinese field is reached, at the edge of which the kepala is waiting to accompany me on my rounds.

"Where are the new coolies tapping today, Lum Tung?"

"I put them on the old trees by the big hill, Tuan."

"Good! Are they working well?"

"They are cutting a little deep, Tuan."

By this time we have reached the old trees, and I find the 15 new coolies just arrived from China doing excellent work for new coolies. One small youth, who looks about 12 years old, has to stand on his tip-toes in order to reach the top cut. Crossing the road on my way to see some Chinese weeders, I enter some virgin jungle, disturbing a troop of monkeys in the tree tops, who, as they leap from branch to branch, chatter defiance at the strange intruder. A few brilliant-hued butterflies, blue, green, white, and other mingled colors, flit across my path, some of which are probably unknown to science.

"Ugh! A shudder runs up my spine as a large black snake slips off a log alongside the track. I could not kill him as

he quickly glided under cover. Suddenly the path opens out into a large space, in which are scattered several Malay houses, each with its own small plot of orchard. Among the limes, bananas, and breadfruit trees several Hibiscus shrubs are ablaze with scarlet blossoms, whilst beneath their ranches fowls are sheltering from the strong sun. Each plot is enclosed by a weak-looking fence of split bamboo, while lofty and aged cocoanut trees tower over all. As I turned the corner of the first house I met my old friend Hadji Ali, dressed in nothing but a faded cloth, mending his fishing basket, while sitting up on the verandah are his wife and pretty daughter, the latter's raven hair being accentuated by a single scarlet flower of Hibiscus.

"Tabek, Tuan."

"Tabek, Hadji."

"Is the Tuan thirsty?"

"Yes, Hadji, I am."

Rising, Hadji went to the back, whence he returned with a small monkey on a long cord. He placed the monkey at the foot of a cocoanut tree, up which it quickly climbed, only stopping once to scratch itself. Reaching the top the monkey selected (directed by jerks of the cord from below) a young green cocoanut, which it dropped to the ground. Drawing his parang (the

large slasher which all Malays carry) he quickly cut the top off the outer husk, pierced the eye holes in the shell, and gave me the nut to drink.

"Where is the Tuan going?"

"I am going to see my weeders and tappers, Hadji."

"There is a big tiger in this strip of jungle, Tuan. He was round here last night after my dog. I made a prayer to Allah and he went away. This morning I tracked him up to the corner there. He killed a deer early this morning, and will wait close at hand till this evening before he finishes it. The Tuan's men frightened him coming to work this morning."

"Right! Hadji, you get Pipi and some more Malays to come up to my bungalow about 4 o'clock this evening. I will ask Tuan Cunningham over, and we will try and get a shot at him."

"Very good, Tuan. Tabek."

Continuing my way I soon left the Malay village behind, and reached the young rubber plantation, where a gang of 30 Chinese with large hoes were engaged in weeding. One of the coolies, noticing me, quickly warned his companions by singing an unmelodious song, the words of which were unintelligible to me, though probably announcing my approach. Noticing some weeds uncut I called "Loie la!" ("Come here") to the guilty coolie.

"Mo shick" ("Don't understand"), said the coolie.

Everyone turned round and grinned.

"L-o-i-e la! you moping kitei. Teung ne neung ming, ne marlow, you son of a sea cook. Don't understand. All right, I won't understand to give you your wages at the end of the month." The coolie by this time had run back quickly, and was diligently reweeding his work. The sky now became dark and cloudy, and ominous rumbles of thunder were heard. I quickly hurried to the top of a high hill on which the Javanese coolies were tapping, and from the summit obtained a good view of heavy rain clouds rapidly advancing in our

direction. I immediately blew my whistle to warn the tappers to cease tapping and to lift the latex cups, and whistles were soon sounding from field to field. Before they had collected the latex from the cups at the foot of a third of their 300 trees the rain was upon them. Down it came in a sheet, soaking everything immediately, and washing out of the cups hundreds of pounds of rubber latex.

Placing my watch and note book under my topee, the only dry place, I made for the rubber factory soaked to the skin. A few minutes after arrival there the coolies began to come in, their thin wet clothing sticking to them like Canadian bathing suits, and some of them shivering with the cold. Forming a queue the coolies entered the factory, poured their latex, or what remained of it, into a large stone bath, their cup washings into another bath, threw their bark shavings and scrap rubber into boxes, and then left the factory by another door. When all were in I added acetic acid to the latex, which immediately coagulated, ready for the machines. By this time the engine and machines were running, and four Tamil coolies were busily putting bark and scrap through four sets of corrugated rollers. So leaving a few instructions with the Javanese driver, I went home for a change and some tiffin. Tiffin over, I was just settling down to a smoke when bang! bang! Two back-fires from the engine, and the factory stopped running, so down to the factory I went again.

"Apa korang, Ressart?" ("What's the matter, Ressart?")

"Don't know, Tuan; I cleaned it out yesterday."

"Well, try and start it up again." Ressart turned on the gas, let some compressed air into the chamber, but it wouldn't start off.

"Call in the two Sikhs, Ressart."

The two Sikh watchmen appeared, and they tried their best to give the engine a flying start by pulling the flywheel round, but not a move.

"Is it sparking?"

"Yes, Tuan."

"Valves right, gas good?"

"Yes, Tuan."

"Open it up."

Feeling angry at Ressart's slow manner of working, I grabbed a spanner, and we soon had it opened up. The combustion chamber was clean, but the exhaust valve didn't seem to be seating properly, and on examination I found a piece of sacking a foot square wedged under the valve and halfway down the exhaust pipe.

"What is this, Ressart?" And I pulled it out to show him.

"A piece of sacking I was cleaning with, Tuan."

"Yes, I know it's sacking; but why the deuce did you leave it inside the engine? Next time you clean her out you had better leave a spanner inside, or a brick, and then the engine will be spoilt properly."

"I am very sorry, Tuan."

"All right, Ressart. I'll let you off this time; only, use your brains."

A few minutes later the engine was running well, and I was just leaving the factory when Cunningham appeared.

"Hullo, Roberts. I got your note all right."

"Right."

"So I see. Well, I hope you brought some cartridges along with you. I've only three left."

"Yes, I brought about twelve along."

"Good. Well, come along to the bungalow until 4 o'clock, when we can go out after the tiger. Well, here we are. What will you have to drink?"

"Whisky stengah, thanks."

Whiskies brought and cigarettes going, I noticed that Cunningham sipped his drink meditatively, and evidently had something on his mind, so I refrained from asking him any questions. Presently he said: "I had rather a nasty experience to-day."

"Yes?"

"A Javanese tapper tried to stab me."

"Oh! Did you kill him?"

"It was like this. He was one of these sulky brutes, you know. His work was bad, so I told him that he would have to improve or I would be compelled to cut his wages. That I didn't wish to do so, but most certainly would if his work wasn't better within the week. Well, to-day Leepan, my Javanese head man, and I visited him and examined his work. It was no better; in fact, he had ruined about 16 trees for the next three months—he has cut right into the wood and made an awful mess. I don't know what the visiting agent will say if he sees those trees when he visits me next month—give me a shaking up, or the sack, or something. Anyway, I told the coolie that I would fine him a dollar, and that if he still persisted in doing bad work I would put him right off the estate. At that he whipped out a knife and struck at my stomach. I jumped back just in time, otherwise I would now be in the Ipoh Hospital. Leepan hit him across the wrist with his stick, and he dropped the knife. I then closed with him and threw him hard to the ground. A few more coolies ran up, and they abused him right and left; in fact, if he hadn't been a fellow-countryman I believe they would have killed him. Anyway, my Sikh watchman took him along to the police station in Ipoh, and I'll have to appear against him on Monday. I can't make it out. I have always treated

my coolies well, and never strike them, and they work well for me too. This sulky brute must be an exceptionally bad egg. Leepan told me that he was always causing trouble in the house lines."

"Well, Cunningham, I'm glad to see you here instead of in Ipoh Hospital, or cut to pieces, as poor Jackson was. Come on, old man, let's go out shooting now. I see the coolies waiting down on the road there."

"Tabek Pipi, is the tiger still there?"

"Yes, Tuan, I went up after the rain to see, and heard him growl."

"Good. You, Hadji here, and those Malay and Tamils, can go up to the old tapioca factory and work back through the jungle towards the new clearing. Make as much noise as you can. We will wait at the end of the old road. He must come out there."

"Very well, Tuan."

Cunningham and I sat down on a log for a spell, as it would take a quarter of an hour or so before the coolies would reach the point where they commenced

beating. A small white fox terrier, followed by the Kranie with a rifle under his arm, suddenly appeared round a corner of the path facing us, and the dog commenced to bark.

"Hang it all, here's the Kranie's dog. If he barks like this he'll scare the tiger the wrong way. Here, Spot; here, old man. What do you want, Kranie?"

"Please, sir, if master does not mind I thought I would like to go shooting too."

"Is that why you have put on those fancy clothes, Kranie? You look like Harry Lauder. If the tiger sees you he'll faint with fright."

"No, sir. In India gentlemens dress up very nicely to shoot tiger."

"Do they really, Kranie? Why didn't you hire an elephant, and shoot from his back, like King George did, Kranie?"

"I am not King George, sir. I—"

"All right, Kranie; sit down there and keep quiet. I can hear them beating now. Only, please point your rifle away from my head."

The beaters were slowly advancing, and the jungle, which was previously alive with sound, was now silent as before a storm. Disturbed birds flew over our heads, a solitary hornbill flapped his way into the horizon, and flying squirrels skimmed from tree to tree.

"Hist! look!" said Cunningham.

A small mouse deer about 18in high trotted across the path, a jungle fowl, gorgeous in his dark red plumage, appeared, cocked his head on one side, and listened attentively. The white dog or the Kranie's clothes caught his eye, and he flew chuckling into the bushes. Two sudden snorts, and a pig rushed past.

"Now, look out, look out; you fire first, Cunningham. Hold the dog tight, Kranie," I whispered.

Louder and louder sounded the beating. Our nerves were strained to concert pitch, while the Kranie was trembling visibly. A crashing of the jungle on our right, and we faced round with rifles ready, straining to catch a glimpse of Stripes.

"Sudah lari, Tuan" ("He has slipped us, Tuan"), and Pipi stepped out of the jungle.

"Where?"

"A few yards back, Tuan. He jumped through between two of the Tamils and got away."

"Call the two Tamils here."

"They have run home, Tuan."

"Hang it! Did they run fast?"

"Yes, Tuan; as fast as the Tuan's fire bicycle."

"I wish I'd had a shot at that pig," said Cunningham. "I'd a good chance there."

"Oh, well, never mind; better luck next time. It must have been the Kranie's clothes that frightened him all right."

"Please, sir, I'm very sorry, sir."

"That's all right, Kranie; perhaps your clothes saved our lives. Come on home by the new clearing path, Cunningham. I want to see how my weeders finished their job. We'll have time before it gets dark. You had better come too, Kranie; these coolies can take back our rifles now."

We started off, looked at the weeding, and were on the homeward path gaily talking about how fast the two coolies must have run when Spot, who was trotting along ahead, stopped suddenly, growled, sniffed the air, while the hair on his back lifted with either fright or anger.

"Tiger!" said Cunningham, and we all stopped short. Hough! a large tiger sprang out of the jungle, snapped up Spot in the same spring, and disappeared into the bushes on the other side, leaving a musty smell like bad meat behind him. I felt weak and empty inside, Cunningham's face was tense and his eyes dilated, while the Kranie's knees were knocking together and his face quivering with fear.

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Cunningham, and we walked off as fast as we could, every now and again glancing over our shoulders and trying to appear unconcerned. While on the homeward way after we had left the tiger a mile or so behind the Kranie whined: "He was a very good dog, sir; I paid 20dol for that dog."

"Well, it's better to lose 20dol than it would be to lose yourself, isn't it, Kranie?"

"Yes, sir. Good-night, sir."

Reaching home we dined, put a few records on the gramophone, and turned in well content with our day's work.