

IN A DIM ROOM

Lord Dunsany

It is some while now since I have recorded any unusual experience that has come the way of my friend Jorkens. The fact is that I incurred a certain amount of odium in one house by bringing him into it. It was not my fault, nor do I think it was his. What happened was that a certain friend of mine said that his children liked thrilling tales, and I told them a few tales of lions and tigers, which had quite failed to thrill them. It suddenly occurred to me that there is something a little unusual in some of Jorkens's experiences among Asian or African carnivora, so that any tale of his might be likely to succeed where those that I told had failed. So I said to my friend's three children that I knew an old hunter of big game whose experiences were more out-of-the-way than mine, and asked my friend if I might one day bring him to tea.

I had no idea that there would be anything frightening about one of Jorkens's tales; nor did I think that the

three children, ranging between ten and twelve years old, would be easily frightened. The permission to bring Jorkens was readily given, and the children unfortunately asked him for a thrilling tale, in those actual words, and Jorkens began at once as soon as they asked him. Now it is all blamed on me. I can only say that they asked for it, and they got it.

It should be borne in mind that they had never seen Jorkens before, and had only his word for what kind of man he was; and then children can be very credulous. Well, here is the story, which he told almost as soon as he was seated in a comfortable chair, with the children standing before him, two boys of ten and eleven and a girl of twelve.

It was all about a tiger. But I was counting on his telling a straight story, such as I have so often heard him tell to grown-ups, and did not expect him to vary his style to suit his audience, if "suit" can be the proper word for the alarming effect he created.

"The tiger," said Jorkens, "had spotted me and was following me quite leisurely, as though it did not want to run in the hot weather, and knew perfectly well that I couldn't. My story may serve as a convenient warning to you, when you grow up, never to go near an Indian jungle unarmed, and never to think as I did that just for once, on that particular morning, and for only a short walk, it wouldn't matter. It mattered more than I think you can possibly guess. The tiger was there, and he was coming slowly after me, and I was walking away, and the tiger was walking a little faster than I was. Well, of course I realized that if he was only doing five yards in a hundred faster, I had no chance of escaping by walking. And I knew that running would only make it worse."

"Why?" asked the children.

"Why," said Jorkens, "because if I started a new game

the tiger would play it too. At walking he was only gaining five yards in a hundred, but at running he would have gained fifty. That's why I preferred walking, but it wasn't any better really, because it would end the same way. Unfortunately it wasn't actually in the jungle, but on some rocky land outside it; and there was no chance of a tree, because I was walking away from the jungle."

"Why?" asked another child.

"Because the tiger was between me and it," said Jorkens. "The tigers go outside the jungle at night and go back in the very early morning, when the peacocks are waking and screaming. All this was in the early morning, but the sun was well up and I thought that the tigers would all have been back long ago. So I went for that walk unarmed, and of course I was quite mistaken."

"Why were you taking the walk?" asked the girl.

"You should never ask anyone," said Jorkens, "why he did anything that leads to disaster; because all such things are done for the same reason, which one does not like to admit. But there it is, they are all for the same reason, pure foolishness."

"Did it lead to disaster?" asked she.

"You shall hear," said Jorkens. "Well, I think I told you I was on rocky land; it was hilly too; and the tiger was getting nearer. And then I saw a cave in the rocks, near the top of a little hill. Of course to go in there would cut off my retreat; but my retreat was doing me no good, and there was nowhere better to go. It seemed to me that the small cave might get smaller, till there was no room for the tiger, or it might get larger and have ramifications among which I might dodge him. There were just two small hopes and nowhere else to go. So I stooped and went into the cave, and the tiger came in too."

"He was still some way behind me, and I saw the light

go out as he entered, for he just about filled the entrance. The cave did get smaller, and soon I was on all fours. Still the tiger did not hurry. If it got smaller still, I might still conceivably squeeze on where the tiger could not. And it did get a little smaller, but not small enough. We went on over the smooth gray stone, and it got darker as we went, till I could no longer see the color of the floor, and the tiger seemed to absorb the whole of the daylight.

"A faint hope came to me from a story of a skeleton of a mouse, which had been found in a wall of a cathedral with the skeleton of a cat behind it. He had got where the cat could not follow, but it didn't do him much good. I hoped that, if ever I found such a refuge, the tiger would have more sense than that cat. But still the cave ran on, without getting as small as all that. Still the tiger wasn't hurrying, and that seemed to me to make the situation even more desperate. It seemed to show that the tiger was so sure. Of course I could smell him behind me, for he was still gaining; but the smell seemed almost too strong for a tiger nearly thirty yards behind, and the awful thought came to me that this cave which I hoped might shelter me was the tiger's own lair. That is very much what it seemed to me.

"Then came the hope, after going some distance, that the cave might soon come out through the little hill, though I don't know what good that would have done me. Still, absurd though it may seem, logically it seemed better to me to lose five yards in a hundred when walking in the open, if ever I could get there again, than what I was losing by going on all fours in a race with an animal to whom that sort of walking is natural. And then the uncertainties of the other side of the hill seemed better than those around me, as they often do in such cases, and I thought I might find a tree. But there was no draught in my face; there was only the smell of the tiger



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in the darkness, and I realized I should never come to the open air."

I glanced at the children's faces to see if Jorkens was holding their attention any better than I had done. They were certainly listening intently, though I could not see that they were showing much more interest than they had shown in my poor story. The idea came to me, which may have been quite unjust, that the sympathies of the girl, so far as she felt any, were on the side of the tiger. But that of course may only have been my fancy. I should perhaps say that it was in the autumn, and no lights had yet been turned on, and the room was growing dim. I repeat that it was no fault of mine: I had no idea what was coming.

"The tiger was gaining rapidly," Jorkens continued, "and the perfect smoothness of the limestone floor had made it quite clear by now that it must have for long been polished by soft feet, the large feet of a heavy animal; there was no roughness left on any edge upon which I had put my hand. And then the smooth floor came to a sheer smooth rock without crevice or crack in it, and no turn to the left or right. The cave had ended. I turned round in the dark and smelled, rather than saw, the tiger."

"What happened then?" asked one of the boys.

"He ate me," said Jorkens. "It is a ghost that is speaking to you."

And all the fuss that happened in that dim room was blamed entirely on me.