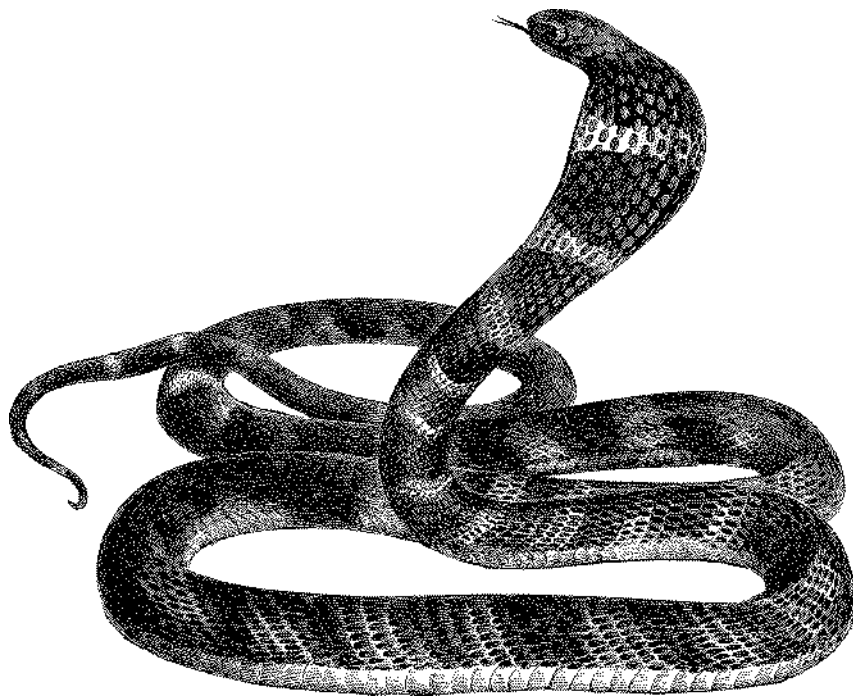


The Literary Herpedium

Classic Tales of Reptiles and Amphibians

Edited by Chad Arment



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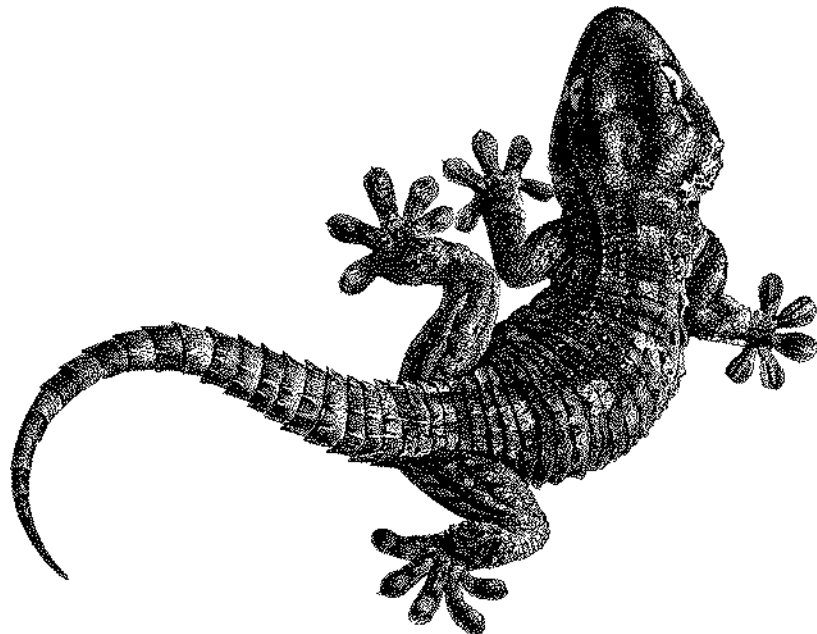
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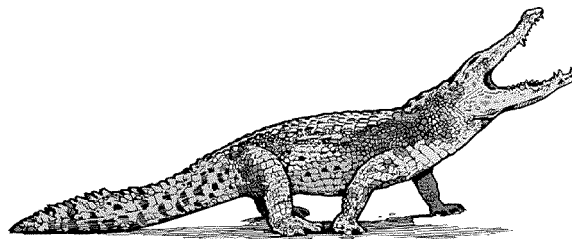
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Contents

“Crotalus”	Bret Harte
On the Trail of a Serpent	Sidney C. Kendall
The Goblin Frog	Dan de Quille
The Man and the Snake	Ambrose Bierce
Collusion Between a Alegaiter and a Water-Snaik	J. W. Morris
Private History of the “Jumping Frog” Story	Mark Twain
The Serpent-Charmer	A. Sarath Kumar Ghosh
Rikki-tikki-tavi	Rudyard Kipling
The Social Life of the Newt	Robert C. Benchley
The Snake	Stephen Crane
The Tortoise	William Fryer Harvey
The Black Mamba	Lord Dunsany
The Reptile	Augustus Muir
Truth is Stranger	Percival Christopher Wren



“Crotalus”

(Rattlesnake Bar, Sierras)

Bret Harte

No life in earth, or air, or sky;
The sunbeams, broken silently,
On the bared rocks around me lie,—

Cold rocks with half-warmed lichens scarred,
And scales of moss; and scarce a yard
Away, one long strip, yellow-barred.

Lost in a cleft! 'T is but a stride
To reach it, thrust its roots aside,
And lift it on thy stick astride!

Yet stay! That moment is thy grace!
For round thee, thrilling air and space,
A chattering terror fills the place!

A sound as of dry bones that stir
In the Dead Valley! By yon fir
The locust stops its noonday whirl!

The wild bird hears; smote with the sound,
As if by bullet brought to ground,
On broken wing, dips, wheeling round!

The hare, transfixed, vrith trembling lip,
Halts, breathless, on pulsating hip,
And palsied tread, and heels that slip.

.

Enough, old friend! — 't is thou. Forget
My heedless foot, nor longer fret
The peace with thy grim castanet!
I know thee! Yes! Thou mayst forego
That lifted crest; the measured blow
Beyond which thy pride scorns to go,

Or yet retract! For me no spell
Lights those slit orbs, where, some think, dwell
Machicolated fires of hell!

I only know thee humble, bold,
Haughty, with miseries untold,
And the old Curse that left thee cold,

And drove thee ever to the sun,
On blistering rocks; nor made thee shun
Our cabin's hearth, when day was done,

And the spent ashes warmed thee best;
We knew thee, — silent, joyless guest
Of our rude ingle. E'en thy quest

Of the rare milk-bowl seemed to be
Naught but a brother's poverty,
And Spartan taste that kept thee free

From lust and spine. Thou! whose fame
Searchest the grass with tongue of flame,
Making all creatures seem thy game;

When the whole woods before thee run,
Asked but — when all was said and done —
To lie, untrodden, in the sun!

On the Trail of a Serpent

Sidney C. Kendall

I

How a Serpent May Beat the Custom-House

This is not nearly so exciting a story as it would have been had not all parties concerned enjoyed a surprising run of good luck and come out of the affair much better than might have been expected; this statement includes the snake.

Mr. Thomas John was on the Continent partly on pleasure and partly on business. On the pleasure side he was escorting a company of lady friends who had been sojourning in the South of France, and on the business side he “traveled in wild beasts.” That is to say that he was buyer for “Jamrach’s” the famous wholesale house in menagerie supplies. So, between Beauty and the Beast, Mr. Thomas John was in a fair way of prosperity. He had shipped from Algiers an assortment of zoological abominations, and he was now meandering leisurely from city to city so as to time his arrival in London about the middle of May. At last there remained only the channel to be traversed, and in the seaport whence they proposed to embark he made a surprising and valuable discovery. A homeward bound Dutch vessel from Java had landed on the quay, among other things, a large wicker hamper which bore neither mark nor sign to indicate whence it came nor whither it should go. The hamper was opened in the presence of the Bureau du Fisc and was found to contain a large snake. The hamper was promptly reclosed and buried beneath a pyramid of assorted freight. The Bureau du Fisc telegraphed to the Prefect of Police for instructions; the Prefect of Police, unable to act without a warrant, applied in due course to the Hotel de Ville; the Hotel de Ville, having looked into the matter and found nothing, passed it on to the Department of the Interior, the Department of the Interior very properly submitted the case to the Bureau of Foreign Affairs, the Bureau of Foreign Affairs referred it to the Chief Executive, and the Chief Executive was away up the Seine shooting ducks and would not be back for a month. That was five years ago, and if it has been decided what is the proper thing to do when snakes come ashore irregularly, the case has not yet retraced its way along its tortuous career to the point of departure. In the meantime it would have gone hard with the snake; but, as was said in our opening passage, this is a story of good luck.

On the very day when the serpent was landed at the port there alighted at the Depot du Chemin du Fer a representative of "Jamrach," the celebrated reptile and wild beast man. Mr. Thomas John had heard at his hotel that the customs authorities had a big snake on their hands, and he very promptly appeared upon the scene. The pile of assorted freight was cautiously taken down and the hamper opened. Whereupon the awestruck spectators recoiled an ample space while Mr. Thomas John thrust his arm into the hamper and drew out coil after coil of snake. There seemed to be no end to the thing one way, or another. At last the head appeared, and, after giving it a careful scrutiny, he made a cautious offer which was promptly accepted, for the Bureau du Fisc was not up on the price of snakes; besides, this snake was dead or thereabout. But Mr. Thomas John knew better. He traveled in wild beasts generally, but snakes were his specialty; in fact, he doted on snakes. The snake was not dead, but lethargic from exhaustion, and there are means of resuscitating unconscious reptiles known only to ophidian experts. These means were practised, and the mottled coils soon began to glide and writhe with a sluggish movement, and the growing crowd of spectators drew farther away. Mr. Thomas John, agent for Jamrach & Co., had acquired a full-grown female python for a song, a mere song, even a song without words, so eager was the Bureau du Fisc to get the creature off his hands. Seeing that the animal, although revived, was under good control, the spectators ventured to draw near and watch the daring man caress the serpent as it glided slowly back and forth across his knees. He held her head at arm's length for a critical inspection and swore by Gog and Magog that she was a beauty. The snake appeared to entertain the same opinion respecting Mr. Thomas John, for she fairly devoured him with serpentine caresses. She went over one shoulder and under the other, round his neck, round his waist, between his legs and turned him into a veritable Laocoon. It was a genuine case of love at first sight on both sides, and love, as everyone knows, is a matter of taste.

The python was then fed in some manner best understood by the man who had served as professional dry-nurse to reptiles in all stages of convalescence. It is written in books of Natural History that when pythons have eaten they go to sleep. This statement, if true, illustrates the wisdom of the serpent; and so the sleeping beauty was replaced, coil upon coil, in the original package, and Mr. Thomas John returned to his hotel, after warning the crowd not to meddle with that hamper; which was entirely unnecessary, for not a man in all France could have been hired to meddle with it for any money. As there exists in the minds of most people an unreasonable objection to traveling in the society of snakes, he said nothing to his lady friends about his acquisition, as he wished to practise a

little craft with a view to transferring it from France to England without any further trouble with custom-houses. Accordingly, he distributed his effects among the other members of his party and so emptied his trunk. It was a large and substantial trunk and it just held the snake snugly packed with her head against half a dozen gimlet holes bored in the lid. Mr. Thomas John did not propose to trust his beloved to the chances of slow freight trains; she was to accompany her owner as personal luggage, and he relied upon his acquaintance with a certain customs official to pass his trunk without inspection.

In due time the party arrived at London Bridge station. Here their ways parted, and several minutes were spent in leave-taking. Having seen the ladies off in their cab, Mr. Thomas John returned to the platform. His trunk was the only one that still lay before the luggage van. A watchful porter shouldered it to his cab, and he was whirled away to the headquarters of Jamrach's, the wholesale house in menagerie supplies. The precious trunk was carried to his own private room, as he wished to assure himself by a careful examination that the python was in a healthy state before delivering her to the firm. Having had a comfortable cage prepared for the reception of his beautiful prize, he went to his room and got down on his knees before his trunk. For some reason the key would not work.

He tried others, and at last one was found to which the lock responded. As the lid was lifted, a dainty fragrance issued forth, and there appeared a layer of delicate feminine lingerie. What did this mean? He raised a handful of the contents and revealed further mysteries of feminine attire, rustling silks, foamy laces, and snowy embroideries. The trunk was closely packed with elegant ladies' wearing apparel. He slammed the lid and eagerly examined the exterior of the trunk. If not his own, it was exactly like it, and, moreover, it was plastered with the labels of half the stations in Europe. He scanned the lid; the holes he had bored were not there. All was explained; he had got the wrong trunk.

Mr. Thomas John was no fool; he knew that his ophidian affinity was not shared by the public. The full significance of the situation flashed upon him at once. He rose slowly to his feet with his hands clenched and his eyes wild with alarm. The thought that struck his brain issued through his white lips, "Who has the other trunk?" He knew that for a lady to open his trunk in the privacy of her chamber would mean, in all probability, a most hideous tragedy. His only hope was that, having the wrong key, she might be unable to open the trunk before he had time to make the exchange. Back to London Bridge station with the trunk he went as fast as horses were permitted to travel in London's crowded

streets. The porters were interviewed. One of them remembered carrying up a trunk “as like that as two peas. It belonged to a young lidy as was travelin’ with an old lidy which was very good-lookin’, the young lidy, that was.” He had put it on their cab, and had not heard where they were going; some of the cabmen might know. So he sped to the adjacent cab-stand. No cabman could be found who had that day conveyed to parts unknown a young lady and an old lady, “which was very good-lookin’, the young lidy, that was.” What on earth was to be done? In all the annals of fact or fiction was there ever so dreadful a dilemma! Some men see snakes where snakes are not, and their experiences are horrible beyond language. What, then, will happen when that trunk is opened by a lady, a young lady, and very good-looking? Nothing he could do would prevent it, and it appeared the part of wisdom for him to be silent and not make the world aware who was responsible for this horror.

Mr. Thomas John passed a sleepless night, and the next morning he tremblingly read the papers in search of what he dreaded to find. But there was no report of a serpent at large in the jungles of London, nor had any one heard of a lady being scared into insanity by finding one in her trunk.

Ditto the next morning *et seq.*

Weeks passed away, and Mr. Thomas John still remained minus a full-grown female python and plus a trunk full of society garments which he could not wear.

II

How a Serpent May Go Astray

The London and Dover Mail, by which Mr. Thomas John had traveled, conveyed in another compartment the Dowager Mrs. William Henry of Fulham and Miss Alice Maud of Hackney. There are no surnames in this story. On arriving at London Bridge the maid stepped aside to secure their luggage, which, in the absence of a checking system, passengers in England must look after themselves. Her mistress’s trunks, which were large and numerous, were sent on by a special truck; but her own trunk, as she was to spend a few days at her home, would go on the cab. From London Bridge to Fulham is a long drive, and from Fulham to Hackney is still further; so it was after dark when the young lady reached her home on Mare Street. Her people lived over a haberdasher’s, and their home was reached by a long stairway up which the cabman toiled

with her trunk on his shoulder. “By Josh, that’s ‘eavy!” said he, as he lowered it carefully upon the carpet of the spare-room. There was no one in but the house-maid, and she was just going out, so the young lady had the house to herself. She lighted the gas and proceeded to refresh her toilette after traveling. Her trunk must be opened. She kneeled before it. The key for some reason refused to turn. Her bunch contained many others, and she tried several until at last the lock clicked and the lid started by the pressure of the contents.

If the reader has divined that Miss Alice Maud is the young lady “which” as the porter said was very good-looking, and that the trunk she has just unlocked is the trunk whose loss is giving Mr. Thomas John a sleepless night, it will be understood that we are on the verge of a horror that we shudder to contemplate. But, as was remarked at the outset, this is a tale of good luck, and the nerves of our readers may be protected in advance by the assurance that the good luck of this story endures to the end and the expected never happens. The young lady is alone in this great house, all other rooms are dark, the shop below is closed, the street is comparatively deserted, if she should need assistance no cry of hers could reach a human ear. She kneels before the trunk, her hands are upon it, she has commenced to raise the lid, when—the front door opens, and voices are heard upon the stairs.

She rose to her feet, her cheeks flushing and her eyes sparkling with pleasure. The parties approaching, on reaching the landing, naturally turned aside to ascertain wherefor the spare-room was lighted. A young lady entered. There was a scream of delight and the two girls were in each other’s arms. Then the old people entered and there was great hugging and kissing as they welcomed their daughter after six months’ absence on the Continent. We observe with some relief that Pater, who weighs two hundred and forty, and who, moreover, is winded by the ascent, has seated himself on the trunk. So it is well for the present. After a few minutes of incoherent conversation the entire family withdraw to the dining-room; the door of the spare-room is closed and we can breathe freely for a little while. Francis George, who lives from home, was sent for and arrived in time to join them in a late English supper. After supper Alice Maud reentered the spare-room, apparently to retire. The other young lady burst impetuously into the room exclaiming:

“Oh! sister mine, you must sleep with me; it will take half the night to answer all my questions. And, besides, Frank will stay till morning, and he must sleep here.” However, they sat on the bed with their arms about each other, conversing for several minutes.

“And there is your trunk, Maud, covered all over with labels; just see where you have been. I suppose it is crammed with good things. Really, dear, you must show me your gowns.” She rose and went to the trunk.

“Wait till morning, Fannie,” said Alice. “The trunk is very full and I would not like to litter up Frank’s room to-night.” So the trunk was not yet opened.

“Well,” said Fannie, “let’s go to bed. Come, sister.”

“I must get my night-gown,” said Alice, going to the trunk.

“Is it on top?” inquired Fannie.

“No, it is near the bottom.”

“Then leave it and I will lend you one of mine.”

How many times they have been on the verge of opening that trunk and we, who know its hideous contents, have been kept in suspense! The two sisters left the room not one moment too soon. A crisis had arrived. Scarcely had the door closed when the lid of the trunk was pushed up by a scaly, bulging fold, and the reptile emerged, fresh and alert. The room was still lighted, the only shadow was beneath the bed, and thither the snake betook herself, drawing in her long body as a hawser glides through a hawse pipe. The lid of the trunk sank down and all remained as before. At that moment the young man entered and prepared to retire. One moment sooner and—but we shudder! Even now the situation is appalling. He turns out the light and gets into bed. When the room is in darkness the python has no need of close quarters, and so it cautiously creeps out from under the bed and makes a silent circuit of the room. For a young man of steady habits and a total abstainer to boot, Mr. Francis George is dangerously near to an attack of delirium tremens. As it happens, he has left the door open just a few inches, and at length the head of the snake emerges three feet into the hall. Here it pauses, at the bottom of one flight of stairs and the top of another. Shall it go up or down? If it goes up, the young ladies’ room is on the next landing, and the door is open. But inasmuch as it is easier to go down-stairs than up, the snake makes a wise choice and starts in the direction of the front door. By the rapidity of its descent it is dragged rather violently out of Francis George’s room, and as it passes under a what-not with a low bottom shelf it makes considerable noise, and, moreover, it thrusts the door wide open. By the noise the young man is aroused from his first slumber,

and, under the impression that someone is in the room, he inquires "Who's there?" Receiving no reply, he turns around and perceives that his door is wide open. This surprises him and he gets out of bed to close it. Fortunately he does so at the right moment. Two seconds earlier and he would have stepped upon the python; one second earlier and he would have jammed its tail in the door. As it was, he closed the door just as the scaly tip glided over the edge of the top stair. The house is dark and silent and the snake has gone down the stairs into the front hall. What will it do next? Will it remain at the bottom of that cul-de-sac and furnish a sensation for the unfortunate who is the first to descend in the morning? Or will it ascend that steep path, and, passing the closed doors, on the first landing, will it enter the chamber where the sisters lie in each other's arms! What a night of terror! And all in the house are slumbering in sweet unconsciousness.

The good luck we have so repeatedly mentioned is about to operate once more. Betsy Ann, the young housemaid, who was about to leave the house when Miss Alice Maud arrived, has spent the evening with her young man at the band-playing in Victoria Park and has returned about the time when the family were retiring. From her window on the fourth or fifth floor, Betsy Ann has witnessed the home-coming of Susan Jane, a housemaid three doors removed. Now Betsy Ann and Susan Jane being bosom friends, it is their custom on their evening out to meet on the stairs and compare notes of their respective young men. So Betsy Ann descends and makes her way to Susan Jane's front door, and the two housemaids sit on the steps and mutually report the progress of their respective courtships. But how does this accommodate the snake?

In the following manner: The front door closed with a spring lock and, once closed, it could not be opened from the outside without a special night-key. This key, in her haste, Betsy Ann had left on her bureau in the tray that held her hair-pins. So, to prevent locking herself out, she had not closed the door, but had left it like the famous door in Bardell and Pickwick, "on the jar." So when the snake came gliding down there was an aperture sufficient to let her out. And there was a full-grown female python on Mare Street, Hackney, in the middle of the night.

III

How a Serpent May Live in London

As soon as breakfast was over the next morning the two young ladies went into the spare-room to inspect the trunk. It was still closed, but when the lid was lifted, to their amazement, it was empty. But in what a condition after being occupied by a slimy reptile! Here is a misapprehension to be removed. Snakes are not slimy, their scaly skins are dry and clean. And so the trunk was as immaculate as when it was new; there was nothing to suggest the use to which it had been put. But how came it empty? Mr. Francis George recalled the fact that he had been awakened by a noise in the room and had found his door wide open. Forthwith, it also appeared that Betsy Jane was honest and truthful, and she confessed with many tears that she had been absent from the house at midnight for the space of an hour, during which time the front door had been open.

Mr. Thomas John, in his anxious scrutiny of the morning paper, did read that a house on Mare Street had been entered by burglars and a lady's trunk rifled of its contents. But not until later did he connect this with the affair in which he was so warmly interested. But; in the meantime, what became of the snake?

There are indications that it enjoyed a nocturnal promenade on Mare Street. It appears to have been seen by a hilarious individual whom the closing of the public-houses had ejected upon the sidewalk, but who, nevertheless, defiantly proclaimed to the universe that he wouldn't "go home till morning, till (hic) daylight doth appear." This gentleman had "ad 'em once," and what he saw in the dim light as he turned the corner upon Mare Street convinced him that he "ad 'em again." So he embraced a friendly lamp-post and sent forth into the night a long quavering howl which brought Policeman X40 upon the scene, by whom he was arrested and conveyed to the station. Events like these occurred several nights in succession. Delirium tremens became epidemic upon Mare Street. The neighborhood became unpopular among gentlemen of bibulous habits.

But what became of the snake in the glaring day when the streets of London roar with pounding hoofs and grinding wheels?

Midway on Mare Street stands old Hackney church with its closely packed graveyard raised several feet above the pavement, separated from the crowded

sidewalk only by a low stone wall, so that the dead are cheek-by-jowl with the living. At the end of the graveyard furthest from the church was a large triangular patch of nettles with one angle resting on the low stone wall above the Mare Street sidewalk. This was the only spot in Hackney which presented conditions anything approaching its natural habitat. Here, subsequent investigations showed, the python took up her abode for several days, perhaps for several weeks. Here was the circular spot where she lay coiled when nights were chilly. Here, between the nettles and the wall of the building at the end of the graveyard, was the place where she lay stretched out in the warm sunlight, peering out through the nettles almost into the faces of the passing throng. How did she manage to live?

That question is easily answered. Hackney churchyard is an aristocratic feline rendezvous. Here assembles nightly a numerous philharmonic association. Besides vocal entertainment there were other attractions which drew together a concourse of cats. The love-making of the parish was transacted here. All local feline disputes were brought hither and settled, some by arbitration and some by war. In fact our python had but to uncoil half her length to help herself to live cat-meat, which is Belgian hare to a snake. She had bass, alto, tenor, and soprano on her bill of fare. Before her depredations had reduced the choral society to such a degree as to excite suspicion an end came to this security and plenty.

An officious church-warden took it into his head that a thicket of nettles in a graveyard is unsightly, so he ordered the sexton to cut them down. Swish, swish, swish; nearer and nearer came the scythe. The snake glided silently away to a temporary shelter at the other side of the church, and Old Giles was spared the fright of his life. That night she issued forth in search of a more secure abode. Along the hard paved streets of the city she went at a time of night when only tavern outcasts were abroad. Midnight roisterers are a very susceptible class of people, and that is why it is that the python's course can be traced by a trail of delirium tremens. At last she felt beneath her scales the soft dewy grass of Victoria Park. She crossed a narrow arm of one of the lakes and made her home amid the flags and sedges of a small island. Here she remained secure from molestation for the rest of the summer. Her food was water-fowl and she helped herself promiscuously. But those water-fowl were the special charge of one of the under park keepers, "which his name it were Joseph James." Joseph James was not long in detecting a diminution in the number of his charges. In a short time the Chief Warden observed the same phenomenon and he bestowed upon his underling a severe reprimand.

The diminution went on perceptibly. Ducks and other fowl which Joseph James knew by sight were missing from time to time and seen no more. Joseph James was threatened with the loss of his position, which imperilled not only his bread and butter, but also his enjoyment of the seat by the fireside in the tap-room of the "Pig and Whistle," to which he was entitled by virtue of being a regular customer and steady pay. A man out of work, Joseph James very well knew, would not be welcome at the "Pig and Whistle," or anywhere else. One afternoon, as he was dejectedly brooding over the problem, a duck which he was watching gave a loud quack, threw up its wings, and sank beneath the water. "Swap me bob!" said Joseph James. "That's the first time I ever see a duck take a cramp and git drowned." Upon second thought he concluded that the duck had been drawn under by some animal below the surface. He took his punt and poled out to inspect a small island in that vicinity. At the farther side he received quite a shock. Between the reeds and the water extended the body of a serpent. It was in motion, and his eyes distended as yard after yard glided upward until the tapering tail disappeared in the thicket and all was still. He returned to the shore in great excitement and reported thus to the Park Warden: "I found out wot's 'ookin' of them ducks, sir. There's a bloomin' big snyke on that there hisland."

The Park Warden seemed to think this quite probable until Joseph James proceeded to give his estimate of the reptile's proportions, then he became incredulous and dismissed him with advice to attend to his work and drink less.

"Did ever you hear the like?" demanded Joseph James of a sympathetic audience to whom he had delivered an eloquent recital of his peculiar grievances. "Ere 'e's ear-wiggin' of me every dy 'cos them ducks and mud'ens is goin' off, an' w'en I finds a blahsted big snyke'e sez I got the jim-jams."

"M'ybe you 'as," was the facetious reply. To be sure the jim-jams were getting to be a very common complaint in that particular part of London. Men were having attacks in broad daylight and in Victoria Park. The police were becoming so sensitive on the subject that whoever reported having "seen a snyke" was summarily hauled away to the station and treated to the Keeley cure.

"Look 'ere, Myte," said a good-natured bystander, "if I was you I wouldn't sy too much abart that there snyke, or m'ybe you'll lose yer job."

Joseph James, not being by any means a total abstainer, actually began to

have his doubts and boldly announced his intention to revisit the island and settle the matter. This was heroic, and the crowd gathered on the shore to watch. He landed and strode about among the rushes prodding here and there with his pole. Suddenly there rose up before him the head of a great serpent and looked him steadily in the face. A most precipitate retreat would have been quite excusable. But Joseph James had a problem to solve. He winked hard several times, but could not eliminate the serpent from his vision. He unlimbered his pole for action, shouting, "Snyke or jim-jams, 'ere's at you!" The snake took the hint and got herself into marching order. None too soon, for as she swept aside in her undulating movement the pole came down with a blow that would have smashed her flat. The snake took to the water, fortunately on the side nearest the mainland, in full view of the crowd. Whereat there were cries of horror, panic, and stampede. Joseph James took to the water at the same moment but on the other side of the island. A few bold spirits in the crowd stood their ground and with shouts and stones turned the reptile back to the island, which it regained about the same instant that Joseph James stepped ashore. The news spread and the crowd grew every moment. The Park Warden appeared. "There's yer snyke, Mr. Warden," said Joseph James; "'e ayn't no jim-jams; 'e's gone back on 'is hisland." Taking the collective testimony of the crowd the snake appeared to be about the size of the flag-pole on the green yonder. That is to say, about two feet in diameter and something over a hundred feet long.

The matter was so serious that the Warden telegraphed to Mr. Thomas John, of Jamrach & Co.'s, with whom he had had dealings in the wild beast way. That telegram furnished a clue for the solution of a problem over which Mr. Thomas John had been worrying all summer. He arrived within an hour, and, after looking carefully over the island, he pronounced the reptile a full-grown female python, probably the one that had escaped from him early in the summer. A large hamper and several men were landed upon the island. By whatever arts the reptile was captured, the hunt was concealed from the spectators by the thick rushes. But certain it is that the hamper was much heavier when it came back. As it was hoisted into a cart and driven away someone in the crowd shouted, "Now, there won't be no more jim-jams!" The remark was so significant that Mr. Thomas John inquired its meaning and was informed that there had been an unusual number of cases of delirium tremens in that locality and the peculiar thing about them was that the victims had invariably been seized with their attacks in the streets. Mr. Thomas John saw a great light. He spent several days in the neighborhood looking up the exact localities where these attacks had been experienced. He found that they

extended over an irregular course reaching from Victoria Park to Mare Street and terminated in the vicinity of Hackney church. The churchyard was the only piece of unoccupied land in the vicinity and he subjected it to a rigid scrutiny. In the soil that had been soft in the early summer he observed indications that meant so much to his practised eye. In fact he was able to read the whole history of the python's sojourn there of several weeks. Evidently, then, it was somewhere in this neighborhood that it had first succeeded in escaping from the trunk. But how had it done so without discovery, that was the mystery. He went to the nearest police station and asked permission to look over their calendar. Being taken for a detective, permission was easily obtained. He found that about the middle of May a house on Mare. Street had been burglariously entered and a lady's trunk rifled of its contents. The trunk, it seemed, had not been taken away. Very good; he would call and see that trunk. He was received by the two young ladies, Miss Alice Maud, as it happened, being home for the day. They readily gave him all needed information and showed him the trunk, still in the spare-room. How his pulse quickened! It was his own trunk; there were the gimlet holes he had bored, so small that they had escaped notice. He ran over all the facts: The trunk had been unlocked, but not opened. The bedroom door and the hall door had both been open; a young man sleeping in the room had been awakened by a noise. He could see it all. He looked at the two beautiful girls who had been exposed to such a frightful peril, and such a wave of thankfulness came over him that his eyes filled with tears. One more question remained: How could he return these ladies their property without letting them know the dreadful truth? "You had just returned from the Continent, young lady," said he. "Would you mind giving me a list of the places you visited?" The list was furnished and he compared it with the labels pasted on the trunk. It was then seen that they were not identical. No one had thought of making this comparison before. "Just as I supposed, Miss," said he. "This is not your trunk." The young ladies exchanged looks of dismay. "The parties who took your trunk," he continued, "evidently took trunk and all and substituted another just like it."

"But how do you know that?" she asked.

"Because I have your trunk and its contents in my possession, and you shall receive it to-morrow morning."

The ladies were surprised and delighted. But Alice inquired: "But if you have recovered the trunk did you not also capture the thieves?"

Mr. Thomas John, not being a detective in reality, found himself becoming very hot, and he replied seriously: "Well, young ladies, I see that I shall have to explain the whole matter. Your trunk was not stolen at all. The fact is that you brought up my trunk from London Bridge station and left yours behind."

"The idea," said Alice Maud, "and the men who handled that trunk complained that it was heavy and made me pay extra."

"Oh, they will always do that!" said Mr. Thomas John as he prepared to leave. He was anxious to get away. What if they should ask him how it happened that his trunk was empty, just back from the Continent! Once on the street and out of danger he experienced a revulsion of feeling and hailed a passing cab. It was a needless expense, but he wanted to laugh for about an hour, and this was the only available privacy.

The next morning Miss Alice Maud received her trunk and the empty one was sent away. Not a thing was missing, and a delightful day was spent by the girls in the examination of continental souvenirs. Mr. Francis George arrived that evening. He listened incredulously to the story of the trunks. "So," said he, "you brought up an empty trunk from the station and didn't know it. And there was no burglary at all."

"So it appears."

"Very well, then; now tell me what it was that woke me up that night and who threw my bedroom door wide open."

No one could answer these questions, and Mr. Francis George was invited to state his opinion.

"My opinion," said he, "is this. The trunk was stolen and an empty one left in its place, which was probably done to keep us quiet while they got away with the swag. The thief then found that he could not get the trunk off his hands without detection. Or it may be that he became conscience-stricken and wished to return to an honest life. So he trumped up this story as a means of restoring stolen property. However, you have your trunk and he has his. So all's well that ends well!" With which appropriate sentiment we terminate our tale of a snake.

The Goblin Frog

Dan de Quille

Peter O'Reilly was one of the pioneer miners of Washoe and one of the discoverers of the Comstock silver mines—one of the men who turned up to the light of day that glittering ore which was the first of over \$200 million since taken from the great vein then hit upon.

Before going to work on Six-Mile Cañon, at the head of which the great silver discovery was made, Peter O'Reilly mined on Gold Cañon, a long and large ravine heading on the opposite side of Mount Davidson, a mile south of the canyon first named. There he wrought with pan and rocker at washing placer gold from the sand and gravel of the bed and bars of the cañon.

“Pete” was fond of rambling away alone along the meanderings of the stream in search of rich spots, where he could be by himself and mine in his own way. Provided he could find a few “colors” (small specks of gold) he would dig and pan away for days, quite confident that his luck would at last lead him to the right spot and that in the end his labors would be richly rewarded.

Pete was not only a spiritualist, but was also a firm believer in luck and in all manner of signs and omens. The last mining he ever did on Gold Cañon was when he started in to prospect a bar on which he found already located a squatter in the person of a frog, which frog began in a short time to give him a great deal of trouble.

He constructed a small dam or reservoir to turn the small rill running in the ravine into a little ditch leading to his panning hole near the bar. The reservoir held but about a dozen hogsheads of water, and it was soon after this was completed and filled that Pete first had notice of the presence on his claim of the frog. He had sunk a pit almost down to the bedrock and had washed out two or three pans of dirt that yielded well. He was down in his prospect hole digging up and filling his pan with some particularly fine-looking gravel when he heard a small, squeaky voice sing out, “Struck it?”

Pete was at the moment deeply absorbed in the work in which he was engaged, and the shrill, squeaking voice ringing out so near at hand and asking a question that so exactly chimed in with the train of the thought running through

his head so startled him that his pick almost fell from his hands. He pricked up his ears and looked about in all directions to see whence proceeded the cheery little voice. He half expected to see a little red-mantled fairy standing in some neighboring clump of willows or peering out at him through a tuft of the rank grass growing along the margin of the rill. As he thus stood gazing about in open-mouthed amazement, the little voice again piped out: "Struck it? Struck it? Struck it?"

Turning his eyes in the direction whence proceeded the inquiring voice, Pete presently descried a small green frog mounted upon a stick that projected an inch or two above the surface of the water in his reservoir. The frog was but a rod or two away and seemed, as Pete thought, to be looking inquiringly into his eyes.

"Struck it?" again said the frog.

"It is a good omen," said Pete. "The little fellow says I have struck it. Though he is no countryman of mine, I believe in me sowl I have struck it in this very hole."

So saying, Pete carried the pan of dirt he had dug to his panning place, panned it out, and did not get a color. He was not a little astonished at this result and had a notion to call the frog a liar, but on turning to look for him the little fellow was gone. Pete went back to his pit and dug another pan of dirt—listening all the time to hear what the frog would say about it. Not a word did the frog say, however.

Pete washed out the pan of dirt and got nearly a dollar. "Aha! ye little divil!" cried he, "where air ye now? Ye hadn't a word to say this time!"

Well pleased with his luck, Pete began digging another pan of dirt from the place where he had got the last, expecting a rich haul. He had been at work but half a minute when the voice rang out sharp and clear: "Struck it? Struck it? Struck it?"

"Oh, yes, ye little fool; it's aisy for ye to say 'Sthruck it! Sthruck it!' afther seein' what I got in me last pan!"

"Struck it! Struck it! Struck it!" cried the frog in what to Pete seemed a triumphant tone.

“All right, me bye!” cheerily assented Pete, nodding his head toward the little fellow that sat winking and blinking on the end of the stick. “All right, me bye—av course I’ve sthruck it!”

He carried the pan to his water hole, washed it out, and didn’t get a color. “Ye’r the warst liar I iver saw!” cried Pete, rising up from his work and shaking his fist in the direction of the frog. Not a sign of the frog did he see, however; the little fellow having very prudently retired to the bottom of the pond.

Pete grumbled for a time and then went and dug another pan of gravel; the frog again stuck his head above the water and said “Struck it?” and again the dirt yielded no gold when washed out. Thus it went; when the frog said nothing he got a good yield of gold, but when he made his usual inquiry—sneering inquiry, Pete now considered it to be—no gold was found.

At last Pete had washed so many pans of dirt out of which the frog had charmed all the gold that he began to grow very angry. He was also not a little discouraged. Finally, just as he began to scrape the dirt out of the bottom of a very promising crevice, and just as he was beginning to think the frog would this time hold his tongue, out came the little fellow with his “Struck it? Struck it?”

Pete quietly laid down his crevicing spoon, slyly gathered two or three big rocks, then softly, on tiptoe, began stealing toward his little persecutor, and just as the frog cried, “Struck it?” Pete let drive at him with a rock so huge that it could have been hurled by no lesser than Ajax, missing his mark but raising a great commotion in the pond.

Thinking he had given his bad angel a fright that would last him a fortnight, Pete returned to his work. He had almost filled his pan with very rich-looking dirt when up came the frog’s head and out came his tantalizing, “Struck it? Struck it?”

Pete threw the pan of dirt as far as he could send it and made for the frog, determined on its destruction. He would stand no more of its infernal nonsense. Shovel in hand, he waded into the middle of the little reservoir and scooped and tore about in it with the vigor and venom of a mad bull. Once or twice he saw, or imagined he saw, the frog dart through the discolored water and brought down the back of his shovel upon the spot with such a “spat” that the blow might have been heard half a mile away. At length, not seeing anything more of the frog, Pete concluded that he had killed him. He gave him a parting curse

and, being now wrought up to such a pitch of excitement and nervousness that he could work no more that afternoon, strode away, put on his coat, and went home.

The next morning he returned to his claim and his work. He had washed out several pans of dirt and was getting good pay out of them when suddenly there fell upon his ear the shrill cry of "Struck it?"

The first note sent a thrill through Pete's frame like the sharp shock of an electrical battery, then a chill fell upon his heart, and his hair almost rose on end. His evil genius, as he now firmly believed the little green frog to be, was still there, alive and at his old tricks.

He kicked over the pan of dirt he had dug and made a rush for the reservoir, the frog plumping under the water at his approach. Pete again went into the reservoir with his long-handled shovel and charged about at a furious rate, but he could see nothing of the frog or anything that looked like it. Being determined to do for his tormentor this time, Pete went for his pan and began trying to bail out the reservoir. Finding this too great a task, he got a pick, dug down the embankment of dirt and rocks forming the little dam, and eagerly watched, with uplifted shovel, for the frog as the water ran off. The water all ran out but the frog was nowhere to be seen.

Pete then waded out in the oozy bed of the pond, digging and plowing about with his shovel, but he failed to start the goblin frog. He then arrived at the very reasonable conclusion that the little imp had gone down the stream with the body of water that rushed out of the reservoir when it was opened. He cruised about the spot for an hour or two, going down the channel of the ravine, turning over rocks and beating tufts of grass with his shovel, but saw nothing of the frog. Thinking his evil genius had been washed down through the cañon into the Carson River, Pete concluded to rebuild his dam in order that he might have water ready for use in the morning. This job done he went home, feeling quite sure that he had either killed or permanently ousted his little enemy.

The next day he returned to his work. Before starting in, however, he walked around the reservoir several times, peering keenly into the water and kicking every bunch of grass about its margin. The frog was nowhere to be seen or started. Pete then went to his prospect hole and began to dig, stopping occasionally to cock an eye toward the pond and to listen for the frog. All promised well for Pete. He had dug a pan of dirt without the hated interruption

and was on his way to wash it out when “Struck it? Struck it?” was squeaked from the pond by the goblin frog.

This was too much for Pete. The pan dropped from his hands, his under jaw fell, and he sank down upon the nearest rock, where he sat and considered the matter. As he was wondering if it was possible for him ever in any way to rid him himself of the evil thing that destroyed his luck, the frog again sang out, cheerily as ever, “Struck it? Struck it?”

“May the divil burn ye!” cried Pete. “I haven’t sthrucc it, and what’s more I never will wid ye there, ye dirty little blackguard! Must I come afther ye again, ye unclane baste of the divil?”

“Struck it?” said the frog.

“Ye think so!” said Pete, and catching up his pick, he rushed to the reservoir and began digging down the embankment.

Presently he paused in this work and said: “It’s of no use. Haven’t I tried to get him in all ways? No; when I get the wather off he’ll be gone. He’s no human frog! I’ll jist let him howld possession and I’ll hunt me another place. Divil the lick will I ever sthrike here again; it’s the divil’s own child he is!”

Pete began to gather up his clothes and tools with the intention of vacating the place, when he stopped and gazed wistfully at his prospecting hole. “A promising place it was, too, in the main,” said he. “Now, shall I be tormented away by a dirty little baste like yon? No; I’ll give him a warmin’ yet and all the likes of him. I’ll pepper him tomorrow!” So saying, Pete put on his coat and struck out for home, turning to shake his fist toward the pond as he departed.

The next morning Pete went up to Johntown and borrowed a shotgun; he then bought a quantity of powder and shot and returned to his claim, saying as he strode along: “I’ll kill that frog if it’s among the possibilities!”

On reaching his claim, he crawled to a rock near the edge of the pond and, seating himself upon it, watched for some hours, but the goblin frog was neither to be seen nor heard.

“He has run away,” said Pete, “but I’ll kill him if he is anywhere on the face of the green earth!”

He then moved along down the cañon and presently saw what seemed to be his tormentor. He blazed away and stretched the creature dead on the margin of the rill. He was just beginning to rejoice over the victory he had gained when up from the spot sprung another frog, the very picture of that he had killed. Pete looked at this new apparition and then turned and gazed upon the slaughtered animal to be sure it was dead. Finding it stretched lifeless on the ground, he went after the second frog. This was finally slaughtered, and he continued his hunt down the cañon. All that day he hunted frogs, blazing away at everything that moved in the water or that looked at all like a frog.

The next day he bought more ammunition and again went on the warpath along the cañon, firing so frequently that some of the miners above thought that the Piutes had attacked the settlers at the mouth of the cañon. The next day and the next, and right along for a week, Pete hunted the cañon, always beginning with the pond on his claim, and keeping up a murderous fire as often as he saw a frog or the suspicion of one. Not satisfied with this, he hunted the banks of the Carson River for a mile or two up and down the mouth of the cañon. He talked of nothing but frogs for a fortnight, bought and fired away whole sacks of shot and pound after pound of powder, and seemed to be almost insane on frogs. But he at last concluded that he had cleaned them all out and the goblin frog among the rest.

One morning, to the surprise of his neighbors in the camp who had been watching him curiously for some days, instead of starting out with his gun he took his pan and crevicing spoon and departed down the cañon in the direction of his claim.

An hour later Pete came tearing back to camp. "I'll niver sthrike pick intil the cañon again!" cried he. "That imp o' hell is still there on me claim! I was but liftin' me dirt for me second pan whin he raised his head from the wattur and says, 'Pete, have he sthrucc it?' sez he. 'May the divil bless me,' said I, 'if ye can't have the whole bloody cañon; I'll niver sthrike pick intil it again.' No more I will. That frog is no human frog—it's a child o' hell!"

Pete kept his word; he never mined in the cañon again. He left for Six-Mile Cañon to hunt a place not haunted by a demon frog, and he had not mined many weeks before he and his partner, Pat McLaughlin, struck it! struck it! struck it!—struck the great Comstock silver lode, the hidden treasure house of the gnomes and the wonder of the whole mining world. He was, as he always believed, driven into this great good fortune by a goblin frog.

The Man and the Snake

Ambrose Bierce

It is of veritabyll report, and attested of so many that there be nowe of wyse and learned none to gaynsaye it, that ye serpente hys eye hath a magnetick propertie that whosoe falleth into its svasion is drawn forwards in despyte of his wille, and perisheth miserabyll by ye creature hys byte.

Stretched at ease upon a sofa, in gown and slippers, Harker Brayton smiled as he read the foregoing sentence in old Morryster's *Marvells of Science*. "The only marvel in the matter," he said to himself, "is that the wise and learned in Morryster's day should have believed such nonsense as is rejected by most of even the ignorant in ours."

A train of reflection followed—for Brayton was a man of thought—and he unconsciously lowered his book without altering the direction of his eyes. As soon as the volume had gone below the line of sight, something in an obscure corner of the room recalled his attention to his surroundings. What he saw, in the shadow under his bed, was two small points of light, apparently about an inch apart. They might have been reflections of the gas jet above him, in metal nail heads; he gave them but little thought and resumed his reading. A moment later something—some impulse which it did not occur to him to analyze—impelled him to lower the book again and seek for what he saw before. The points of light were still there. They seemed to have become brighter than before, shining with a greenish lustre that he had not at first observed. He thought, too, that they might have moved a trifle—were somewhat nearer. They were still too much in shadow, however, to reveal their nature and origin to an indolent attention, and again he resumed his reading. Suddenly something in the text suggested a thought that made him start and drop the book for the third time to the side of the sofa, whence, escaping from his hand, it fell sprawling to the floor, back upward. Brayton, half-risen, was staring intently into the obscurity beneath the bed, where the points of light shone with, it seemed to him, an added fire. His attention was now fully aroused, his gaze eager and imperative. It disclosed, almost directly under the foot-rail of the bed, the coils of a large serpent—the points of light were its eyes! Its horrible head, thrust flatly forth from the innermost coil and resting upon the outermost,

was directed straight toward him, the definition of the wide, brutal jaw and the idiot-like forehead serving to show the direction of its malevolent gaze. The eyes were no longer merely luminous points; they looked into his own with a meaning, a malign significance.

II

A snake in a bedroom of a modern city dwelling of the better sort is, happily, not so common a phenomenon as to make explanation altogether needless. Harker Brayton, a bachelor of thirty-five, a scholar, idler and something of an athlete, rich, popular and of sound health, had returned to San Francisco from all manner of remote and unfamiliar countries. His tastes, always a trifle luxurious, had taken on an added exuberance from long privation; and the resources of even the Castle Hotel being inadequate to their perfect gratification, he had gladly accepted the hospitality of his friend, Dr. Druring, the distinguished scientist. Dr. Druring's house, a large, old-fashioned one in what is now an obscure quarter of the city, had an outer and visible aspect of proud reserve. It plainly would not associate with the contiguous elements of its altered environment, and appeared to have developed some of the eccentricities which come of isolation. One of these was a "wing," conspicuously irrelevant in point of architecture, and no less rebellious in matter of purpose; for it was a combination of laboratory, menagerie and museum. It was here that the doctor indulged the scientific side of his nature in the study of such forms of animal life as engaged his interest and comforted his taste—which, it must be confessed, ran rather to the lower types. For one of the higher nimbly and sweetly to recommend itself unto his gentle senses it had at least to retain certain rudimentary characteristics allying it to such "dragons of the prime" as toads and snakes. His scientific sympathies were distinctly reptilian; he loved nature's vulgarities and described himself as the Zola of zoölogy. His wife and daughters not having the advantage to share his enlightened curiosity regarding the works and ways of our ill-starred fellow-creatures, were with needless austerity excluded from what he called the Snakery and doomed to companionship with their own kind, though to soften the rigors of their lot he had permitted them out of his great wealth to outdo the reptiles in the gorgeousness of their surroundings and to shine with a superior splendor.

Architecturally and in point of "furnishing" the Snakery had a severe simplicity befitting the humble circumstances of its occupants, many of whom, indeed, could not safely have been intrusted with the liberty that is necessary to the full

enjoyment of luxury, for they had the troublesome peculiarity of being alive. In their own apartments, however, they were under as little personal restraint as was compatible with their protection from the baneful habit of swallowing one another; and, as Brayton had thoughtfully been apprised, it was more than a tradition that some of them had at divers times been found in parts of the premises where it would have embarrassed them to explain their presence. Despite the Snakery and its uncanny associations—to which, indeed, he gave little attention—Brayton found life at the Druring mansion very much to his mind.

III

Beyond a smart shock of surprise and a shudder of mere loathing Mr. Brayton was not greatly affected. His first thought was to ring the call bell and bring a servant; but although the bell cord dangled within easy reach he made no movement toward it; it had occurred to his mind that the act might subject him to the suspicion of fear, which he certainly did not feel. He was more keenly conscious of the incongruous nature of the situation than affected by its perils; it was revolting, but absurd.

The reptile was of a species with which Brayton was unfamiliar. Its length he could only conjecture; the body at the largest visible part seemed about as thick as his forearm. In what way was it dangerous, if in any way? Was it venomous? Was it a constrictor? His knowledge of nature's danger signals did not enable him to say; he had never deciphered the code.

If not dangerous the creature was at least offensive. It was *de trop*—"matter out of place"—an impertinence. The gem was unworthy of the setting. Even the barbarous taste of our time and country, which had loaded the walls of the room with pictures, the floor with furniture and the furniture with bric-a-brac, had not quite fitted the place for this bit of the savage life of the jungle. Besides—insupportable thought!—the exhalations of its breath mingled with the atmosphere which he himself was breathing.

These thoughts shaped themselves with greater or less definition in Brayton's mind and begot action. The process is what we call consideration and decision. It is thus that we are wise and unwise. It is thus that the withered leaf in an autumn breeze shows greater or less intelligence than its fellows, falling upon the land or upon the lake. The secret of human action is an open one:

something contracts our muscles. Does it matter if we give to the preparatory molecular changes the name of will?

Brayton rose to his feet and prepared to back softly away from the snake, without disturbing it if possible, and through the door. Men retire so from the presence of the great, for greatness is power and power is a menace. He knew that he could walk backward without error. Should the monster follow, the taste which had plastered the walls with paintings had consistently applied a rack of murderous Oriental weapons from which he could snatch one to suit the occasion. In the meantime the snake's eyes burned with a more pitiless malevolence than before.

Brayton lifted his right foot free of the floor to step backward. That moment he felt a strong aversion to doing so.

"I am accounted brave," he thought; "is bravery, then, no more than pride? Because there are none to witness the shame shall I retreat?"

He was steadying himself with his right hand upon the back of a chair, his foot suspended.

"Nonsense!" he said aloud; "I am not so great a coward as to fear to seem to myself afraid."

He lifted the foot a little higher by slightly bending the knee and thrust it sharply to the floor—an inch in front of the other! He could not think how that occurred. A trial with the left foot had the same result; it was again in advance of the right. The hand upon the chair back was grasping it; the arm was straight, reaching somewhat backward. One might have said that he was reluctant to lose his hold. The snake's malignant head was still thrust forth from the inner coil as before, the neck level. It had not moved, but its eyes were now electric sparks, radiating an infinity of luminous needles.

The man had an ashy pallor. Again he took a step forward, and another, partly dragging the chair, which when finally released fell upon the floor with a crash. The man groaned; the snake made neither sound nor motion, but its eyes were two dazzling suns. The reptile itself was wholly concealed by them. They gave off enlarging rings of rich and vivid colors, which at their greatest expansion successively vanished like soap-bubbles; they seemed to approach his very face, and anon were an immeasurable distance away. He heard,

somewhere, the continuous throbbing of a great drum, with desultory bursts of far music, inconceivably sweet, like the tones of an æolian harp. He knew it for the sunrise melody of Memnon's statue, and thought he stood in the Nileside reeds hearing with exalted sense that immortal anthem through the silence of the centuries.

The music ceased; rather, it became by insensible degrees the distant roll of a retreating thunder-storm. A landscape, glittering with sun and rain, stretched before him, arched with a vivid rainbow framing in its giant curve a hundred visible cities. In the middle distance a vast serpent, wearing a crown, reared its head out of its voluminous convolutions and looked at him with his dead mother's eyes. Suddenly this enchanting landscape seemed to rise swiftly upward like the drop scene at a theatre, and vanished in a blank. Something struck him a hard blow upon the face and breast. He had fallen to the floor; the blood ran from his broken nose and his bruised lips. For a time he was dazed and stunned, and lay with closed eyes, his face against the floor. In a few moments he had recovered, and then knew that this fall, by withdrawing his eyes, had broken the spell that held him. He felt that now, by keeping his gaze averted, he would be able to retreat. But the thought of the serpent within a few feet of his head, yet unseen—perhaps in the very act of springing upon him and throwing its coils about his throat—was too horrible! He lifted his head, stared again into those baleful eyes and was again in bondage.

The snake had not moved and appeared somewhat to have lost its power upon the imagination; the gorgeous illusions of a few moments before were not repeated. Beneath that flat and brainless brow its black, beady eyes simply glittered as at first with an expression unspeakably malignant. It was as if the creature, assured of its triumph, had determined to practise no more alluring wiles.

Now ensued a fearful scene. The man, prone upon the floor, within a yard of his enemy, raised the upper part of his body upon his elbows, his head thrown back, his legs extended to their full length. His face was white between its stains of blood; his eyes were strained open to their uttermost expansion. There was froth upon his lips; it dropped off in flakes. Strong convulsions ran through his body, making almost serpentine undulations. He bent himself at the waist, shifting his legs from side to side. And every movement left him a little nearer to the snake. He thrust his hands forward to brace himself back, yet constantly advanced upon his elbows.

IV

Dr. Druring and his wife sat in the library. The scientist was in rare good humor.

“I have just obtained by exchange with another collector,” he said, “a splendid specimen of the *ophiophagus*.”

“And what may that be?” the lady inquired with a somewhat languid interest.

“Why, bless my soul, what profound ignorance! My dear, a man who ascertains after marriage that his wife does not know Greek is entitled to a divorce. The *ophiophagus* is a snake that eats other snakes.”

“I hope it will eat all yours,” she said, absently shifting the lamp. “But how does it get the other snakes? By charming them, I suppose.”

“That is just like you, dear,” said the doctor, with an affectation of petulance. “You know how irritating to me is any allusion to that vulgar superstition about a snake’s power of fascination.”

The conversation was interrupted by a mighty cry, which rang through the silent house like the voice of a demon shouting in a tomb! Again and yet again it sounded, with terrible distinctness. They sprang to their feet, the man confused, the lady pale and speechless with fright. Almost before the echoes of the last cry had died away the doctor was out of the room, springing up the stairs two steps at a time. In the corridor in front of Brayton’s chamber he met some servants who had come from the upper floor. Together they rushed at the door without knocking. It was unfastened and gave way. Brayton lay upon his stomach on the floor, dead. His head and arms were partly concealed under the foot-rail of the bed. They pulled the body away, turning it upon the back. The face was daubed with blood and froth, the eyes were wide open, staring—a dreadful sight!

“Died in a fit,” said the scientist, bending his knee and placing his hand upon the heart. While in that position, he chanced to look under the bed. “Good God!” he added, “how did this thing get in here?”

He reached under the bed, pulled out the snake and flung it, still coiled, to the center of the room, whence with a harsh, shuffling sound it slid across the polished floor till stopped by the wall, where it lay without motion. It was a stuffed snake; its eyes were two shoe buttons.

Collusion Between A Alegaiter And A Water-Snaik

J. W. Morris

There is a niland on a river lying,
Which runs into Gautimaly, a warm country,
Lying near the Tropicks, covered with sand;
Hear and their a symptum of a Wilow,
Hanging of its umberagious limbs & branches
Over the clear streme meandering far below.
This was the home of the now silent Alegaiter,

When not in his other element confine'd:
Here he wood set upon his eggs asleep
With 1 ey observant of flis and other passing
Objects: a while it kept a going on so:
Fereles of danger was the happy Alegaiter!
But a las! in a nevil our he was fourced to
Wake! that dreme of Blis was two sweet for him.
1 morning the sun arose with unusool splendor
Whitch allso did our Alegaiter, coming from the water,
His scails a flinging of the rais of the son back,
To the fountain-head which tha originly sprung from,
But having not had nothing to eat for some time, he
Was slepy and gap'd, in a short time, widely.
Unfoalding soon a welth of perl-white teth,
The rais of the son soon shet his sinister ey
Recause of their mutool splendor and warmth.
The evil Our (which I sed) was now come;
Evidently a good chans for a water-snaik
Of the large specie, which soon appeared
Into the horison, near the bank where reposed
Calmly in slepe the Alegaiter before spoken of.
About 60 feet was his Length (not the 'gaiter)
And he was aperiently a well-proportioned snaik.
When he was all ashore he glared upon
The iland with approval, but was soon
"Astonished with the view and lost to wonder" (from Wats)
(For jest then he began to see the Alegaiter)

Being a nateral enemy of his'n, he worked hissself
Into a fury, also a ni position.
Before the Alegaiter well could ope
His eye (in other words perceive his danger)
The Snaik had enveloped his body just 19
Times with "foalds voluminous and vast" (from Milton)
And had tore off several scails in the confusion,
Besides squeezing him awfully into his stomoc.
Just then, by a fortinate turn in his affairs,
He ceazed into his mouth the careless tale
Of the unreflecting water-snaik! Grown desperate
He, finding that his tale was fast squesed
Terrible while they roaled all over the iland.

It was a well-conduckted Affair; no noise
Disturbed the harmony of the seen, ecsept
Onct when a Willow was snaped into by the roaring.
Eeach of the combatence had n't a minit for holering.
So the conflick was naterally tremenjous!
But soon by grate force the tail was bit complete-
Ly of; but the eggzeration was too much
For his delicate Constitootion; he felt a compression
Onto his chest and generally over his body;
When he ecspressed his breathing, it was with
Grate difficulty that he felt inspired again onct more.
Of course this state must suffer a revolootion.
So the alegaiter give but one yel, and egspired.
The water-snaik realed hissself off, & survay'd
For say 10 minits, the condition of
His fo: then wondering what made his tail hurt,
He slowly went off for to cool.

Private History of the “Jumping Frog” Story

Mark Twain

Five or six years ago a lady from Finland asked me to tell her a story in our negro dialect, so that she could get an idea of what that variety of speech was like. I told her one of Hopkinson Smith’s negro stories, and gave her a copy of *Harper’s Monthly* containing it. She translated it for a Swedish newspaper, but by an oversight named me as the author of it instead of Smith. I was very sorry for that, because I got a good lashing in the Swedish press, which would have fallen to his share but for that mistake; for it was shown that Boccaccio had told that very story, in his curt and meagre fashion, five hundred years before Smith took hold of it and made a good and tellable thing out of it.

I have always been sorry for Smith. But my own turn has come now. A few weeks ago Professor Van Dyke, of Princeton, asked this question:

“Do you know how old your Jumping Frog story is?”

And I answered:

“Yes—forty-five years. The thing happened in Calaveras County in the spring of 1849.”

“No; it happened earlier—a couple of thousand years earlier; it is a Greek story.”

I was astonished—and hurt. I said:

“I am willing to be a literary thief if it has been so ordained; I am even willing to be caught robbing the ancient dead alongside of Hopkinson Smith, for he is my friend and a good fellow, and I think would be as honest as any one if he could do it without occasioning remark; but I am not willing to antedate his crimes by fifteen hundred years. I must ask you to knock off part of that.”

But the professor was not chaffing; he was in earnest and could not abate a century. He named the Greek author, and offered to get the book and send it to me and the college textbook containing the English translation also. I thought I would like the translation best, because Greek makes me tired. January 30th he sent me the English version, and I will presently insert it in this article. It is

my Jumping Frog tale in every essential. It is not strung out as I have strung it out, but it is all there.

To me this is very curious and interesting. Curious, for several reasons. For instance:

I heard the story told by a man who was not telling it to his hearers as a thing new to them, but as a thing which *they had witnessed and would remember*. He was a dull person, and ignorant; he had no gift as a story-teller, and no invention; in his mouth this episode was merely history—history and statistics; and the gravest sort of history, too; he was entirely serious, for he was dealing with what to him were austere facts, and they interested him solely because they *were* facts; he was drawing on his memory, not his mind; he saw no humor in his tale, neither did his listeners; neither he nor they ever smiled or laughed; in my time I have not attended a more solemn conference. To him and to his fellow goldminers there were just two things in the story that were worth considering. One was, the smartness of its hero, Jim Smiley, in taking the stranger in with a loaded frog; and the other was Smiley's deep knowledge of a frog's nature—for he knew (as the narrator asserted and the listeners conceded) that a frog *likes shot* and is always ready to eat it. Those men discussed those two points, and those only. They were hearty in their admiration of them, and none of the party was aware that a first rate story had been told, in a first rate way, and that it was brimful of a quality whose presence they never suspected—humor.

Now, then, the interesting question is, *did* the frog episode happen in Angel's Camp in the spring of '49, as told in my hearing that day in the fall of 1865? I am perfectly sure that it did. I am also sure that its duplicate happened in Bœotia a couple of thousand years ago. I think it must be a case of history actually repeating itself; and not a case of a good story floating down the ages and surviving because too good to be allowed to perish.

I would now like to have the reader examine the Greek story and the story told by the dull and solemn Californian, and observe how exactly alike they are in essentials.

[*Translation.*]

The Athenian and the Frog.*

An Athenian once fell in with a Bœotian who was sitting by the road side looking at a frog. Seeing the other approach, the Bœotian said his was a remarkable frog, and asked if he would agree to start a contest of frogs, on condition that he whose frog jumped farthest should receive a large sum of money. The Athenian replied that he would if the other would fetch him a frog, for the lake was near. To this he agreed, and when he was gone the Athenian took the frog, and opening its mouth poured some stones into its stomach, so that it did not indeed seem larger than before, but could not jump. The Bœotian soon returned with the other frog, and the contest began. The second frog first was pinched and jumped moderately; then they pinched the Bœotian frog. And he gathered himself for a leap, and used the utmost effort, but he could not move his body the least. So the Athenian departed with the money. When he was gone the Bœotian, wondering what was the matter with the frog, lifted him up and examined him. And being turned upside down, he opened his mouth and vomited out the stones.

And here is the way it happened in California:

From "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County."

Well, thish-yer Smiley had rat-tarriers, and chicken cocks, and tom-cats, and all them kind of things, till you couldn't rest, and you couldn't fetch nothing for him to bet on but he'd match you. He ketched a frog one day, and took him home, and said he cal'lated to educate him; and so he never done nothing for three months but set in his backyard and learn that frog to jump. And you bet you he *did* learn him, too. He'd give him a little punch behind, and the next minute

*Sidgwick, *Greek Prose Composition*, page 116.

you'd see that frog whirling in the air like a doughnut—see him turn one summerset, or maybe a couple if he got a good start, and come down flat-footed and all right, like a cat. He got him up so in the matter of ketching flies, and kep' him in practice so constant, that he'd nail a fly every time as fur as he could see him. Smiley said all a frog wanted was education, and he could do 'most anything—and I believe him. Why, I've seen him set Dan'l Webster down here on this floor—Dan'l Webster was the name of the frog—and sing out “Flies, Dan'l, flies!” and quicker'n you could wink he'd spring straight up and snake a fly off'n the counter there, and flop down on the floor ag'in as solid as a gob of mud, and fall to scratching the side of his head with his hind foot as indifferent as if he hadn't no idea he'd been doin' any more'n any frog might do. You never see a frog so modest and straightfor'ard as he was, for all he was so gifted. And when it come to fair and square jumping on a dead level, he could get over more ground at one straddle than any animal of his breed you ever see. Jumping on a dead level was his strong suit, you understand; and when it come to that, Smiley would ante up money on him as long as he had a red. Smiley was monstrous proud of his frog, and well he might be, for fellers that had travelled and been everywheres, all said he laid over any frog that ever *they* see.

Well, Smiley kep' the beast in a little lattice box, and he used to fetch him downtown sometimes and lay for a bet. One day a feller—a stranger in the camp, he was—come acrost him with his box, and says:

“What might it be that you've got in the box?”

And Smiley says, sorter indifferent-like, “It might be a parrot, or it might be a canary, maybe, but it ain't—it's only just a frog.”

And the feller took it, and looked at it careful, and turned it round this way and that, and says, “H'm—so 'tis. Well, what's *he* good for?”

“Well,” Smiley says, easy and careless, “he’s good enough for *one* thing, I should judge—he can outjump any frog in Calaveras County.”

The feller took the box again and took another long, particular look, and give it back to Smiley and says very deliberate, “Well,” he says, “I don’t see no p’int about that frog that’s any better’n any other frog.”

“Maybe you don’t,” Smiley says. “Maybe you understand frogs and maybe you don’t understand ‘em; maybe you’ve had experience, and maybe you ain’t only a amature, as it were. Anyways, I’ve got *my* opinion and I’ll resk forty dollars that he can outjump any frog in Calaveras County.”

And the feller studies a minute and then says, kinder sad like, “Well, I’m only a stranger here, and I ain’t got no frog, but if I had a frog I’d bet you.”

And then Smiley says: “That’s all right—that’s all right—if you’ll hold my box a minute, I’ll go and get you a frog.” And so the feller took the box and put up his forty dollars along with Smiley’s and set down to wait.

So he set there a good while thinking and thinking to hisself, and then he got the frog out and prized his mouth open and took a teaspoon and filled him full of quail shot—filled him pretty near up to his chin—and set him on the floor. Smiley he went to the swamp and slopped around in the mud for a long time, and finally he ketched a frog and fetched him in and give him to this feller, and says:

“Now, if you’re ready, set him alongside of Dan’l, with his forepaws just even with Dan’l’s, and I’ll give the word.” Then he says, “One—two—three—*git!*” and him and the feller touched up the frogs from behind, and the new frog hopped off lively; but Dan’l give a heave, and hysted up his shoulders—so—like a Frenchman, but it warn’t no use—he couldn’t budge; he was planted as solid as a church, and he couldn’t no more stir than if he was anchored out. Smiley was a good

deal surprised, and he was disgusted, too, but he didn't have no idea what the matter was, of course.

The feller took the money and started away; and when he was going out at the door, he sorter jerked his thumb over his shoulder—so—at Dan'l, and says again, very deliberate: “Well,” he says, “I don't see no p'int about that frog that's any better'n any other frog.”

Smiley he stood scratching his head and looking down at Dan'l a long time, and at last he says, “I do wonder what in the nation that frog throw'd off for—I wonder if there ain't something the matter with him—he 'pears to look mighty baggy, somehow.” And he ketched Dan'l by the nap of the neck, and hefted him, and says, “Why, blame my cats if he don't weigh five pound!” and turned him upside down and he belched out a double handful of shot. And then he see how it was, and he was the maddest man—he set the frog down and took out after that feller, but he never ketched him.

The resemblances are deliciously exact. There you have the wily Bœotian and the wily Jim Smiley waiting—two thousand years apart—and waiting, each equipped with his frog and “laying” for the stranger. A contest is proposed—for money. The Athenian would take a chance “if the other would fetch him a frog”; the Yankee says: “I'm only a stranger here and I ain't got no frog; but if I had a frog I'd bet you.” The wily Bœotian and the wily Californian, with that vast gulf of two thousand years between, retire eagerly and go frogging in the marsh; the Athenian and the Yankee remain behind and work a base advantage, the one with pebbles, the other with shot. Presently the contest began. In the one case “they pinched the Bœotian frog”; in the other, “him and the feller touched up the frogs from behind.” The Bœotian frog “gathered himself for a leap” (you can just see him!), but “could not move his body in the least”; the Californian frog “give a heave, but it warn't no use—he couldn't budge.” In both the ancient and the modern cases the strangers departed with the money. The Bœotian and the Californian wonder what is the matter with their frogs; they lift them and examine; they turn them upside down and out spills the informing ballast.

Yes, the resemblances are curiously exact. I used to tell the story of the Jumping Frog in San Francisco, and presently Artemus Ward came along and

wanted it to help fill out a little book which he was about to publish; so I wrote it out and sent it to his publisher, Carleton; but Carleton thought the book had enough matter in it, so he gave the story to Henry Clapp as a present, and Clapp put it in his *Saturday Press*, and it killed that paper with a suddenness that was beyond praise. At least the paper died with that issue, and none but envious people have ever tried to rob me of the honor and credit of killing it. The “Jumping Frog” was the first piece of writing of mine that spread itself through the newspapers and brought me into public notice. Consequently, the *Saturday Press* was a cocoon and I the worm in it; also, I was the gay-colored literary moth which its death set free. This simile has been used before.

Early in '66 the “Jumping Frog” was issued in book form, with other sketches of mine. A year or two later Madame Blanc translated it into French and published it in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, but the result was not what should have been expected, for the *Revue* struggled along and pulled through, and is alive yet. I think the fault must have been in the translation. I ought to have translated it myself. I think so because I examined into the matter and finally retranslated the sketch from the French back into English, to see what the trouble was; that is, to see just what sort of a focus the French people got upon it. Then the mystery was explained. In French the story is too confused, and chaotic, and un reposeful, and ungrammatical, and insane; consequently it could only cause grief and sickness—it could not kill. A glance at my retranslation will show the reader that this must be true.

[*My Retranslation.*]

The Frog Jumping of County Calaveras.

Eh bien! this Smiley nourished some terriers á rats, and some cocks of combat, and some cats, and all sort of things; and with his rage of betting one no had more of repose. He trapped one day a frog and him imported with him (*et l'emporta chez lui*) saying that he pretended to make his education. You me believe if you will, but during three months he not has nothing done but to him apprehend to jump (*apprendre a sauter*) in a court retired of her mansion (*de sa maison*). And I you respond that he have succeeded. He him gives a small blow by behind, and the instant after you shall see the frog turn in the air like a grease-biscuit, make

one summersault, sometimes two, when she was well started, and re-fall upon his feet like a cat. He him had accomplished in the art of to gobble the flies (*gober des mouches*), and him there exercised continually—so well that a fly at the most far that she appeared was a fly lost. Smiley had custom to say that all which lacked to a frog it was the education, but with the education she could do nearly all—and I him believe. Tenez, I him have seen pose Daniel Webster there upon this plank—Daniel Webster was the name of the frog—and to him sing, “Some flies, Daniel, some flies!”—in a flash of the eye Daniel had bounded and seized a fly here upon the counter, then jumped anew at the earth, where he rested truly to himself scratch the head with his behind-foot, as if he no had not the least idea of his superiority. Never you not have seen frog as modest, as natural, sweet as she was. And when he himself agitated to jump purely and simply upon plain earth, she does more ground in one jump than any beast of his species than you can know.

To jump plain—this was his strong. When he himself agitated for that Smiley multiplied the bets upon her as long as there to him remained a red. It must to know, Smiley was monstrously proud of his frog, and he of it was right, for some men who were traveled, who had all seen, said that they to him would be injurious to him compare to another frog. Smiley guarded Daniel in a little box latticed which he carried bytimes to the village for some bet.

One day an individual stranger at the camp him arrested with his box and him said:

“What is this that you have then shut up there within?”

Smiley said, with an air indifferent:

“That could be a paroquet, or a syringe (*ou un serin*), but this no is nothing of such, it not is but a frog.”

The individual it took, it regarded with care, it turned from one side and from the other, then he said:

“*Tiens!* in effect!—At what is she good?”

“My God!” respond Smiley, always with an air disengaged, “she is good for one thing, to my notice, (*à mon avis*), she can batter in jumping (*elle peut batter en sautant*) all frogs of the county of Calaveras.”

The individual re-took the box, it examined of new longly, and it rendered to Smiley in saying with an air deliberate:

“*Eh bien!* I no saw not that that frog had nothing of better than each frog.” (*Je ne vois pas que cette grenouille ait rien de mieux qu’aucune grenouille*). [If that isn’t grammar gone to seed, then I count myself no judge.—M. T.]

“Possible that you not it saw not,” said Smiley, “possible that you—you comprehend frogs; possible that you not you there comprehend nothing; possible that you had of the experience, and possible that you not be but an amateur. Of all manner (*De toute manière*) I bet forty dollars that she batter in jumping no matter which frog of the county of Calaveras.”

The individual reflected a second, and said like sad:

“I not am but a stranger here, I no have not a frog; but if I of it had one, I would embrace the bet.”

“Strong, well!”, respond Smiley; “nothing of more facility. If you will hold my box a minute, I go you to search a frog (*j’irai vous chercher*).”

Behold, then, the individual, who guards the box, who puts his forty dollars upon those of Smiley, and who attends (*et qui attend*). He attended enough longtimes, reflecting all solely. And figure you that he takes Daniel, him opens the mouth by force and with a teaspoon him fills with shot of the hunt, even him fills just to the chin, then he him puts by the earth. Smiley during these times was at slopping in a swamp. Finally he trapped (*attrape*) a frog, him carried to that individual, and said:

“Now if you be ready, put him all against Daniel, with their before-feet upon the same line, and I give the signal”—then he added: “One, two, three—advance!”

Him and the individual touched their frogs by behind, and the frog new put to jump smartly, but Daniel himself lifted ponderously, exalted the shoulders thus, like a Frenchman—to what good? he could not budge, he is planted solid like a church, he not advance no more than if one him had put at the anchor.

Smiley was surprised and disgusted, but he not himself doubted not of the turn being intended (*mais il ne se doutait pas du tour bien entendu*). The individual empocketed the silver, himself with it went, and of it himself in going is that he no gives not a jerk of thumb over the shoulder—like that—at the poor Daniel, in saying with his air deliberate—(*L’individu empoché l’argent s’en va et en s’en allant est ce qu’il ne donne pas un coup de pouce par-dessus l’épaule comme ça, au pauvre Daniel, en disant de son air délibéré.*)

“Eh bien! *I no see not that that frog has nothing of better than another.*”

Smiley himself scratched longtimes the head, the eyes fixed upon Daniel, until that which at last he said:

“I me demand how the devil it makes itself that this beast has refused. Is it that she had something? One would believe that she is stuffed.”

He grasped Daniel by the skin of the neck, him lifted and said:

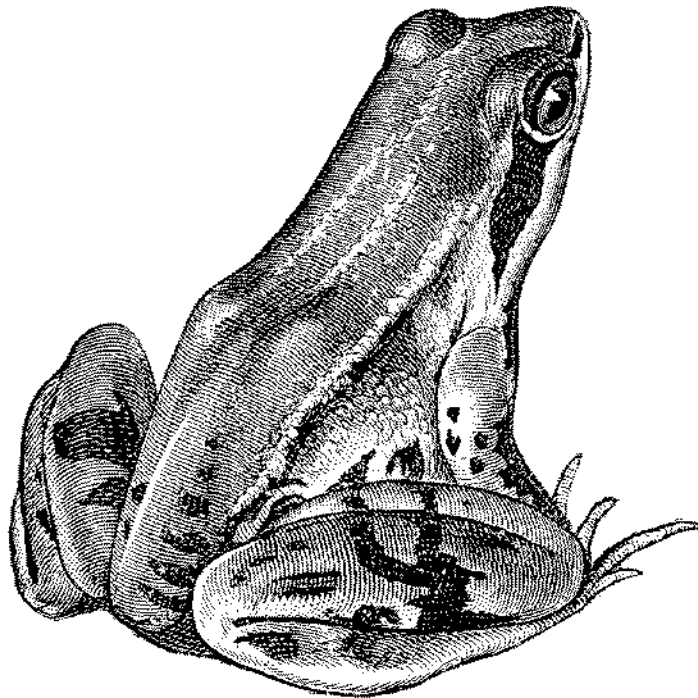
“The wolf me bite if he no weigh not five pounds.”

He him reversed and the unhappy belched two handfuls of shot (*et le malheureux*, etc).—When Smiley recognized how it was, he was like mad. He deposited his frog by the earth and ran after that individual, but he not him caught never.

It may be that there are people who can translate better than I can, but I am not acquainted with them.

So ends the private and public history of the jumping frog of Calaveras County, an incident which has this unique feature about it—that it is both old and new, a “chestnut” and not a “chestnut”; for it was original when it happened two thousand years ago, and was again original when it happened in California in our own time.

April 1894



The Serpent-Charmer

A. Sarath Kumar Ghosh

“Kill it not, sahib! kill it not!”

A thin, brown hand darted forth and snatched up the long, writhing band from under the heap of stones.

With infinite tenderness he stroked and smoothed the speckled head, and hugged the loathsome reptile to his naked breast. It was a hideous black cobra that I was killing, when this strange, semi-naked Hindu had rushed forth and come between me and my prey.

He fondled it, hugged it, kissed it—muttering incoherent words of endearment the while. The cobra lay motionless in his arms, its head well-nigh battered with the many stones I had cast upon it. But if perchance it was not quite dead, and happened to bite the old man, I knew for certain he would fall a corpse the next instant; for the black cobra is the most savage, malicious, and poisonous snake in all India.

“This is foolishness,” I exclaimed; “the cobra may bite you!”

His black, glistening eyes were raised for a moment upon my face, and then seemed to look beyond me into the distance. It was a vacant, glassy stare—as if the words were unheeded or lost in some bygone recollection. His lips quivered—met in a frown—then melted in a smile.

“They *love* me, sahib—cobras do!” The words came soft and low, almost in a whisper.

And again he fondled that hideous, deadly, loathsome reptile against his naked skin. Then, with a swift turn he hurried away and was gone in an instant.

The next evening, just at sunset, I was sitting comfortably in the veranda of my bungalow and smoking the pipe of peace and solitude, when suddenly I saw a dark shadow bending before me. It was my quondam acquaintance. A moment later he squatted down on the veranda and brought out a small wicker basket and a short flute with a large bulb in the middle. Cautiously he tilted up

the lid of the basket, and began playing a low, monotonous tune upon the flute. In a few seconds something began to emerge from the basket—two black, tiny wires they looked, vibrating rapidly to and fro. Then gradually a black round disc followed, with two shining points of light behind the darting wires. The whole seemed to rise in the air under a long black column, marked with speckled bands of a lighter hue.

It was a black cobra.

At that moment a thought struck me. I looked at the hooded head as it waved gracefully to the music; the usually clear spectacled markings were blurred and torn as if by some recent wound. I understood what the cobra was.

“How did you do it?” I asked.

My question was unheeded. Without a word the man went on playing. I understood again; he could not stop while the cobra was still so near him. Then I also realized: the cobra was still fanged.

In a few minutes, in the midst of his playing, he suddenly darted out his other hand, seized the cobra from behind, just under the head, and thrust it into the basket.

“It does not know me—yet,” he muttered, apologetically. Then he added, suddenly, as if recollecting my question, “Yes, I revived it. Very simple—bathed it in cold water, the cool dew of night did the rest.”

“But what did you mean by saying that the cobra did not know you as yet? Do you expect to *tame* it—so that it won’t use its fangs? But this is foolish talk.”

He thought for a moment in hesitation. Then slowly he rose up and came nearer. Turning his naked shoulder to me, he silently placed his finger there.

A long, deep scar ran down in a furrow from the shoulder to the elbow.

“A cobra? Impossible!”

He answered in deep, solemn words:—

“No!—A tiger!”

It was my turn to pause—and wonder. Here was a man, sixty if a day, standing before me quietly as if he were no better than one of the ten thousand villagers that digged and toiled around me—and died off like flies at the first touch of sickness or famine. And yet what deep tragedies lay hid beneath those dimmed and aged eyes! Those matted locks, that wrinkled brow, that snowy beard—what a life history had they witnessed and enacted! Verily, in mystic wisdom, a child was I beside him.

“Tell it to me,” I asked, at last—not in curiosity, not as one asking for a tale; but rather as one eager to learn the wonders of Nature in this strange and unknown land.

He regarded me steadily for a moment, his eyes glistening under his shaggy, over-hanging brows. His lips curled, as if framing a refusal, then slowly relaxed. A faint smile played about them.

“I see. The sahib is not—as the others; he wants to *learn*. It is well.”

It was said in scarce a whisper. The sound of words seemed to jar upon his ears, and speech to be an ungodly practice. In truth he was unwonted to break silence—leastwise, about himself.

I felt honoured by this exception, and listened to his tale with due appreciation.

“Many winters have passed, sahib, since I was—but that is nothing. Didst ever hear of the Temple of Kali, at Lucknow? No; that was before thy time; a stray shell from the British guns fired it when—thou knowest when.”

Here he paused awhile in deep thought; his brow darkened, his eyes flashed. For a moment he hesitated—then the lowering cloud dispersed, the lightning faded.

“I was the serpent charmer of that temple. Didst never hear of Narayan Lal? No matter; I am dead these forty years (this in a whisper hissed into my ear). Narayan Lal played before the goddess with his cobras and pythons on days of festivals, and the faithful votaries knew him as well as the high priest. No worship was complete without me—even as the goddess was unadorned without the black serpent coiled in marble around her blacker breast. Many the offerings I received, much the honour—but, no matter.

“Then came the dreadful day. The priests harangued the multitude before the goddess that her worship was threatened by the foreign rulers of the land. I knew they lied—but the murmuring crowd drowned my voice ere it was raised. I knew that the end of such madness was the very loss to Kali that they threatened; but the frenzy of the multitude swept me away as a feather on the winds. I was powerless to avert the doom.

“The day of wrath came. It was the dark night of Kali; ten thousand votaries thronged that temple. The incense waved, the conches blared, the bleating he-goats poured their blood in sacrifice beneath the sacred axe. But Narayan Lal was not there. The cobras and pythons danced not in honour of Kali.

“I had shaken the dust of Lucknow from my feet, and was on my way to Jhansi to serve with my brother in the temple there. My serpents I carried in two baskets slung over my shoulder—save one. It was a black cobra—female—fanged.

“She was my only love: that cobra I had reared from its birth. It grew to love me as a child its father—nay, a wife her husband. I was both to her.

“Her fangs were never broken. She coiled around my arm, and playfully snatched away the fish from my hand at feeding time, and never so much as bared her teeth. She often slept coiled upon my bosom at night.

“Could I, then, hurt her affections and thrust her ignominiously into the basket? No, sahib; I placed her in my cummerbund against my flesh. There, coiled around my body for warmth, she slept in peace when I struggled on with that heavy load upon my shoulder.

“On we marched for many a day through village and jungle—my love and I. At last the plains of Bundelkhand were reached. Tall, waving grass, as high as my shoulder, swept before my gaze; here and there a stunted tree, burnt and withered, dotted the horizon; dense jungles of short undergrowth marked the course of struggling rivulets now fast drying under that flaming heat. It was silent desolation everywhere.

“One day, just before sunset, we struggled on wearily after the day’s march—my love and I. We longed to reach some level plain, some tiny hamlet, some woodman’s hut, for repose and shelter. But jungle and grass, jungle and grass, lay in an eternal stretch before us. We plodded wearily on—my love and I.

“Suddenly a soft rustling sound in front aroused the echoes of that vast solitude. The tall grass, not ten yards away, shook and trembled, waved and fluttered, as if some gigantic body rolled beneath.

“I stood in a small open space before that surging wave. On and on came the motion, now rising, now falling—still sweeping across the grass from left to right, not ten yards away.

“A low, deep purr caught my ear; a harsh, deep, rasping, grating sound—half a breath, half a snarl. The tall grass suddenly ceased to move—then waved again. Slowly they moved, wider and wider—parted—a gap—a flaming yellow head filled that enormous gap.

“It was a gigantic tiger!

“My heart stood still. My limbs trembled, then lay rigid and motionless. My eyes were fixed on those yellow, blinking orbs in glassy terror. My parched tongue clove to my mouth, my fingers clutched my moistened palms in a death-like grip. I was paralyzed with fear.

“Thus we stood awhile—I was too deadened in agony to know how long. Those frothy, crunching fangs, those hanging, sawing jaws, kept hideous time with the blinking eyes. A gradual torpor seemed to be stealing over me in that terrible presence. I struggled in silent anguish against the coming oblivion.

“Suddenly a low, deep growl issued from those cruel jaws, the enormous, shaggy head bent low upon the ground; the blinking eyes flashed forth in unblinking fury; a yard of tail lashed out into the air. A snarl—a growl—a roar—

“The spell was broken. I slipped the basket-pole from my shoulder and dropped aside to avoid the tiger’s spring. An enormous shadow bounded forth into the air above me; a sudden shock—a singeing pain along my arm—and I was cast aside, staggering, ten feet away.

“I fell on my face, my injured arm doubled up under me. The shock crazed me awhile, and I lay motionless in dim consciousness. Doubtless the tiger would spring again, and then——. But, enough—my manner of death was written on my forehead at my birth. It was fate.

“Thus I lay on the ground, helpless and at the tiger’s mercy. How long it was

I know not; it seemed like a horrible nightmare in which I had lost all conception of time. For a while I might have even relapsed into torpor; I know not.

“And so I lay doubled up on the ground, my face pressing against the beaten grass. A horrible silence reigned around. I almost heard the thumping of my heart against my bared ribs. I felt that the cruel brute was playing with me, as a cat plays with a mouse, before putting me out of my misery. The agonizing suspense grew and grew in intensity like a dull, black cloud of nightmare, till I almost longed for the tiger’s blow to end the torture.

“Suddenly a strange sound struck my ear. It was a hiss—sharp and piercing. It came again—low and continuous. It rose to a shrill, angry crescendo.

“It was answered by a deep, rasping growl. There was a momentary crackling of rotten twigs, as if a heavy body had suddenly risen and relapsed upon them. Then another low growl, a short, sharp snarl, and the angry hiss again sounded above it in defiance. Growl and hiss, hiss and growl, arose above each other in alternate passion. It was a terrible duet of mutual hate and challenge that rang forth in the stillness of the jungle.

“As one in a dream I vaguely lifted up my head. A wondrous sight met my gaze. Not five yards away stood the tiger, his head towards me, his fore-feet planted, his huge back arched in a curve behind, as if about to spring and yet hesitating. Those fiery eyes glared in impotent fury towards me, but not *at* me.

“Yes! Facing the tiger, and just before me, stood my black cobra! Her hood was expanded, her tongue darted in and out like forked lightning, her sparkling eyes glistened like black diamonds. Full half her length was reared in the air, and stood like an ebony column between me and the tiger.

“I understood. In that furious onslaught of the tiger that had sent me sprawling over the ground my love had been rudely awakened from her peaceful slumber, and had thrown herself between me and my terrible foe ere he could recover from his own impetus to spring again.

“I watched in breathless anxiety—unmindful, or unconscious, of the stream of blood that was pouring down my arm and reddening the ground. My limbs were paralyzed for action, or even for movement—and, forsooth, I could have done little to help my love in that mortal combat.

“I could only watch and watch, as one fascinated—and pray to Kali to remember the garland around her breast and befriend her serpent brood.

“Thus they faced each other. Now the growl, now the hiss, arose above the other in hatred and defiance. Now the tail lashed in fury against the yellow stripes; now the uplifted coil swung backwards and forwards as if about to launch forth at the tiger’s throat.

“Each knew and felt the power of the other—Nature had taught them that. One sweep of the tiger’s paws would have crushed the serpent’s head to a mangled mass; one touch of the cobra’s fangs on the tiger’s skin would have turned that fierce and mighty beast to a blackened corpse—even though the cobra had been torn to shreds in the tiger’s death-agony. The tiger’s mighty paw that had often perchance smashed a buffalo’s skull at a single blow was not more formidable than the serpent’s tooth; one sweep of the former, one touch of the latter, were death to either.

“Each stood outside the range of the other; each awaited the other’s onslaught—the black column against the tawny mass. Suddenly the tiger reared his head, lashed his tail, then pressed his jaws low to the ground. No, it was not a spring. Even as the stiffened legs relaxed from their curved tension, even as the head poised momentarily in the air, he swerved aside with a shambling lounge to rush past the cobra. But to no purpose. The black, swinging column paused in mid-air for the hundredth part of a second, then plunged forth sideways like a lightning flash. A hand’s breadth more, and the ivory fangs would have reached the yellow mass; but, with a lurch, the tiger shrank back from those poisoned fangs just in time. A speck of foam, hissed through the air, marked the spot on the tiger’s skin where the blow was aimed.

“And now it was a subtle fencing—parry and thrust, lunge and recovery—between these deadly weapons. The tiger’s paw was raised, held in the air, about to strike the cobra down from above at one blow. But the swinging curve that had waved backwards and forwards now instantly stopped, then slowly began to oscillate sideways; it was out of the tiger’s reach, but still guarding every exit, still at an even distance from that threatening paw that hung in the air. The impending blow, if to come at all, must be instantaneous and on the speckled head; the tiger knew that by instinct. He stood intent with head raised and paw uplifted, like a huge cat watching a butterfly that circles around its head. He sought an opening in the fence to strike and yet escape the serpent’s tooth.

“Suddenly the paw subsided, the tiger bent low upon the ground with a savage growl but again the spring was checked. With an ominous hiss the oscillating coil had stiffened in mid-air into a rigid column before the crouching mass, and the glistening eyes revealed the suppressed vitality that lay beneath the watchful search-light that followed the tiger’s every action. The tiger’s feint had failed.

“Slowly his back relaxed its arch; his head was raised from the ground, his tail ceased to lash. The whole yellow mass became a lazy, flabby, indifferent heap of inertia. Even the glaring eyes began to blink, as the tiger stretched his length indolently upon the ground with a purr of contentment. He seemed to resign the combat—or abide his time.

“For a moment the cobra seemed puzzled by this manœuvre. That the tiger would really yield up his prey, snatched away from his very jaws, and resign a battle once begun, seemed unprecedented and contrary to the animal’s nature. No; it was but a cunning design to allay the cobra’s suspicions, exhaust her strength, and carry the position by a sudden rush.

“She seemed to realize this by a serpentine instinct almost akin to reason. And yet she was now at a terrible disadvantage. To hold up half her length in the air by sheer muscular action was weary work, and would soon tell upon her strength. She must reserve that for the final grapple when it came.

“Gently and cautiously the uplifted curve began to sink upon the ground, the hood still expanded, the glistening eyes still fixed upon the yellow mass in front. So slow was the movement that the black column seemed to hang in the air on an invisible pivot; so infinitesimal the descending angle that the rigid rod hovered over the ground like a dark shadow ere it fell parallel with the tiger’s body. The curved tail, on which the full weight of the uplifted column had rested, now slowly uncoiled, and with a graceful sweep lay peacefully along the grass. Only the hooded head and sparkling eyes kept watch and ward over the lying mass in front—”lying” in both senses of the term. It was an armed truce—a mere breathing time before the deadly battle for life and death.

“For a moment there was an ominous stillness. Not a movement not a quiver, betrayed the slumbering fire in either combatant. But for those glowing eyes, the cobra might have been a painted line upon the green; but for that massive chest, rising and falling with each suppressed breath, the tiger might have been a sculptured effigy. It was the lull before the storm, the deep,

oppressive silence before the thunderclap.

“Slowly, silently, the striped paws that had lain flat upon the ground beside the shaggy head began to curve inwards—inwards under the sweating nose, inwards under the whiskered jaw, inwards under the heaving chest—and there lay still. Slowly and gradually the hind legs that had sprawled on the ground drew inwards under the huge belly—coiled and slid and scraped, till they bore the weight of the mass above. The painted tail swished off a fly from the striped side—and swished again.

“But—the cobra answered him, movement for movement—perhaps unnoticed by the tiger. The rigid column that had lain like a piece of black rubber began to coil and coil at its lover extremity. Soon half its length was coiled. With an almost imperceptible quiver the other half raised itself slightly, as if feeling the support of this solid base—then gently relapsed along the ground in confidence. Only the hooded head, the forked tongue, the glistening eyes marked the extreme tension at which the bolt rested, ready to be shot into the air.

“A terrific roar rent the sky—a huge, dark mass loomed above in a black cloud—down, down it came upon me—my glazed eyes refused to close over my death-agony.

“*Hé Bhugwan!* What was that? Like a bolt from a cross-bow the cobra sprang from the unfolding coil—met the tiger’s throat in midair. The unwinding coil coiled anew around the tiger’s neck. With a heavy thud both reached the earth, not a yard from my head.

“A cloud of dust obscured the scene. The tiger rolling along the ground, clawing frantically at his throat, was all I saw; a low, gurgling, choking sound was all I heard. I waited for no more; with one supreme effort I tottered to my feet and fell headlong over the tall grass—outside the arena. A sudden gush of blood from my wounded arm, and I remembered no more. The last recollection I had was that of a vague, mingled sound of tearing grass and crackling twigs, of rending flesh and stifled groans. Then I remembered no more.

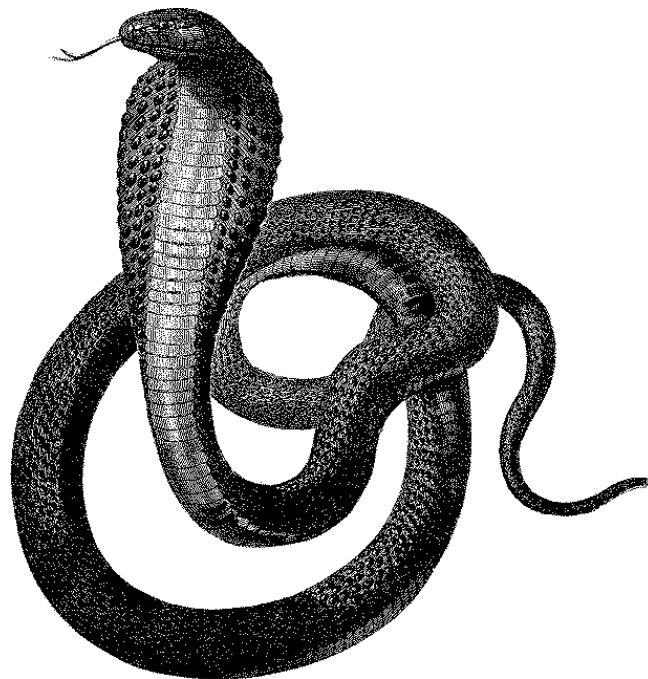
“When I came to myself the cool dew of night was lying thick upon me and the bright moonlight playing upon the scene. A vague, indefinable emotion surged in my heart as consciousness grew upon me—a feeling of true thankfulness indeed, and yet of mingled pain and anguish. The battle-picture stood before me—suddenly I remembered my black cobra, my love, my only love. A horrible

fear clutched at my heart, a deep, over-mastering anxiety swept over me. In frantic haste I arose, and tottered—crawled—to the arena.

“My worst apprehensions were fulfilled. The tiger indeed was dead; he lay on his back, his feet in the air. Already he was a blackened, putrid corpse. The poison indeed had done its work.

“But in that terrible, frantic struggle the tiger’s claws had torn the cobra’s body into shreds of ribbon, had torn and mangled them piecemeal, till they hung in strings from his claws and strewed his chest. Only one piece remained. The cobra’s head, though cut off at the neck by the tiger’s claws, still lay buried deep in the tiger’s throat. Not all the savage strength of the gigantic brute could tear away that fatal grip. It lay there, jaw to jaw, fang to fang, embedded in the now putrid flesh—all that remained of my once beautiful black cobra.

“No, sahib. I could not rear this one to take *her* place. Her soul still lives! And they are jealous—*like women!*” With a hasty salaam the tall figure vanished into the darkness.



“Rikki-tikki-tavi”

Rudyard Kipling

*At the hole where he went in
Red-Eye called to Wrinkle-Skin.
Hear what little Red-Eye saith:
“Nag, come up and dance with death!”*

*Eye to eye and head to head,
(Keep the measure, Nag.)
This shall end when one is dead;
(At thy pleasure, Nag.)*

*Turn for turn and twist for twist—
(Run and hide thee, Nag.)
Hah! The hooded Death has missed!
(Woe betide thee, Nag!)*

This is the story of the great war that Rikki-tikki-tavi fought single-handed, through the bath-rooms of the big bungalow in Segowlee cantonment. Darzee, the tailor-bird, helped him, and Chuchundra, the muskrat, who never comes out into the middle of the floor, but always creeps round by the wall, gave him advice; but Rikki-tikki did the real fighting.

He was a mongoose, rather like a little cat in his fur and his tail, but quite like a weasel in his head and his habits. His eyes and the end of his restless nose were pink; he could scratch himself anywhere he pleased, with any leg, front or back, that he chose to use; he could fluff up his tail till it looked like a bottle-brush, and his war-cry as he scuttled through the long grass, was: “*Rikk-tikk-tikki-tikki-tchk!*”

One day, a high summer flood washed him out of the burrow where he lived with his father and mother, and carried him, kicking and clucking, down a roadside ditch. He found a little wisp of grass floating there, and clung to it till he lost his senses. When he revived, he was lying in the hot sun on the middle of a garden path, very draggled indeed, and a small boy was saying: “Here’s a dead mongoose. Let’s have a funeral.”

“No,” said his mother; “let’s take him in and dry him. Perhaps he isn’t really dead.”

They took him into the house, and a big man picked him up between his finger and thumb and said he was not dead but half choked; so they wrapped him in cotton-wool, and warmed him, and he opened his eyes and sneezed.

“Now,” said the big man (he was an Englishman who had just moved into the bungalow); “don’t frighten him, and we’ll see what he’ll do.”

It is the hardest thing in the world to frighten a mongoose, because he is eaten up from nose to tail with curiosity. The motto of all the mongoose family is, “Run and find out”; and Rikki-tikki was a true mongoose. He looked at the cotton-wool, decided that it was not good to eat, ran all round the table, sat up and put his fur in order, scratched himself, and jumped on the small boy’s shoulder.

“Don’t be frightened, Teddy,” said his father. “That’s his way of making friends.”

“Ouch! He’s tickling under my chin,” said Teddy.

Rikki-tikki looked down between the boy’s collar and neck, snuffed at his ear, and climbed down to the floor, where he sat rubbing his nose.

“Good gracious,” said Teddy’s mother, “and that’s a wild creature! I suppose he’s so tame because we’ve been kind to him.”

“All mongooses are like that,” said her husband. “If Teddy doesn’t pick him up by the tail, or try to put him in a cage, he’ll run in and out of the house all day long. Let’s give him something to eat.”

They gave him a little piece of raw meat. Rikki-tikki liked it immensely, and when it was finished he went out into the veranda and sat in the sunshine and fluffed up his fur to make it dry to the roots. Then he felt better.

“There are more things to find out about in this house,” he said to himself, “than all my family could find out in all their lives. I shall certainly stay and find out.”

He spent all that day roaming over the house. He nearly drowned himself in

the bath-tubs, put his nose into the ink on a writing-table, and burned it on the end of the big man's cigar, for he climbed up in the big man's lap to see how writing was done. At nightfall he ran into Teddy's nursery to watch how kerosene lamps were lighted, and when Teddy went to bed Rikki-tikki climbed up too; but he was a restless companion, because he had to get up and attend to every noise all through the night, and find out what made it. Teddy's mother and father came in, the last thing, to look at their boy, and Rikki-tikki was awake on the pillow. "I don't like that," said Teddy's mother; "he may bite the child." "He'll do no such thing," said the father. "Teddy's safer with that little beast than if he had a bloodhound to watch him. If a snake came into the nursery now—"

But Teddy's mother wouldn't think of anything so awful.

Early in the morning Rikki-tikki came to early breakfast in the veranda riding on Teddy's shoulder, and they gave him banana and some boiled egg; and he sat on all their laps one after the other, because every well-brought-up mongoose always hopes to be a house-mongoose some day and have rooms to run about in, and Rikki-tikki's mother (she used to live in the General's house at Segowlee) had carefully told Rikki what to do if ever he came across white men.

Then Rikki-tikki went out into the garden to see what was to be seen. It was a large garden, only half cultivated, with bushes as big as summer-houses of Marshal Niel roses, lime and orange trees, clumps of bamboos, and thickets of high grass. Rikki-tikki licked his lips. "This is a splendid hunting-ground," he said, and his tail grew bottle-brushy at the thought of it, and he scuttled up and down the garden, snuffing here and there till he heard very sorrowful voices in a thornbush.

It was Darzee, the tailor-bird, and his wife. They had made a beautiful nest by pulling two big leaves together and stitching them up the edges with fibers, and had filled the hollow with cotton and downy fluff. The nest swayed to and fro, as they sat on the rim and cried.

"What is the matter?" asked Rikki-tikki.

"We are very miserable," said Darzee. "One of our babies fell out of the nest yesterday and Nag ate him."

“H’m!” said Rikki-tikki, “that is very sad—but I am a stranger here. Who is Nag?”

Darzee and his wife only cowered down in the nest without answering, for from the thick grass at the foot of the bush there came a low hiss—a horrid cold sound that made Rikki-tikki jump back two clear feet. Then inch by inch out of the grass rose up the head and spread hood of Nag, the big black cobra, and he was five feet long from tongue to tail. When he had lifted one-third of himself clear of the ground, he stayed balancing to and fro exactly as a dandelion-tuft balances in the wind, and he looked at Rikki-tikki with the wicked snake’s eyes that never change their expression, whatever the snake may be thinking of.

“Who is Nag?” he said. “I am Nag. The great god Brahm put his mark upon all our people when the first cobra spread his hood to keep the sun off Brahm as he slept. Look, and be afraid!”

He spread out his hood more than ever, and Rikki-tikki saw the spectacle-mark on the back of it that looks exactly like the eye part of a hook-and-eye fastening. He was afraid for the minute; but it is impossible for a mongoose to stay frightened for any length of time, and though Rikki-tikki had never met a live cobra before, his mother had fed him on dead ones, and he knew that all a grown mongoose’s business in life was to fight and eat snakes. Nag knew that too, and at the bottom of his cold heart he was afraid.

“Well,” said Rikki-tikki, and his tail began to fluff up again, “marks or no marks, do you think it is right for you to eat fledglings out of a nest?”

Nag was thinking to himself, and watching the least little movement in the grass behind Rikki-tikki. He knew that mongooses in the garden meant death sooner or later for him and his family; but he wanted to get Rikki-tikki off his guard. So he dropped his head a little, and put it on one side.

“Let us talk,” he said. “You eat eggs. Why should not I eat birds?”

“Behind you! Look behind you!” sang Darzee.

Rikki-tikki knew better than to waste time in staring. He jumped up in the air as high as he could go, and just under him whizzed by the head of Nagaina, Nag’s wicked wife. She had crept up behind him as he was talking, to make an end of him; and he heard her savage hiss as the stroke missed. He came down

almost across her back, and if he had been an old mongoose he would have known that then was the time to break her back with one bite; but he was afraid of the terrible lashing return-stroke of the cobra. He bit, indeed, but did not bite long enough, and he jumped clear of the whisking tail, leaving Nagaina torn and angry.

“Wicked, wicked Darzee!” said Nag, lashing up as high as he could reach toward the nest in the thorn-bush; but Darzee had built it out of reach of snakes, and it only swayed to and fro.

Rikki-tikki felt his eyes growing red and hot (when a mongoose’s eyes grow red, he is angry), and he sat back on his tail and hind legs like a little kangaroo, and looked all around him, and chattered with rage. But Nag and Nagaina had disappeared into the grass. When a snake misses its stroke, it never says anything or gives any sign of what it means to do next. Rikki-tikki did not care to follow them, for he did not feel sure that he could manage two snakes at once. So he trotted off to the gravel path near the house, and sat down to think. It was a serious matter for him.

If you read the old books of natural history, you will find they say that when the mongoose fights the snake and happens to get bitten, he runs off and eats some herb that cures him. That is not true. The victory is only a matter of quickness of eye and quickness of foot,—snake’s blow against mongoose’s jump,—and as no eye can follow the motion of a snake’s head when it strikes, that makes things much more wonderful than any magic herb. Rikki-tikki knew he was a young mongoose, and it made him all the more pleased to think that he had managed to escape a blow from behind. It gave him confidence in himself, and when Teddy came running down the path, Rikki-tikki was ready to be petted.

But just as Teddy was stooping, something flinched a little in the dust, and a tiny voice said: “Be careful. I am death!” It was Karait, the dusty brown snakeling that lies for choice on the dusty earth; and his bite is as dangerous as the cobra’s. But he is so small that nobody thinks of him, and so he does the more harm to people.

Rikki-tikki’s eyes grew red again, and he danced up to Karait with the peculiar rocking, swaying motion that he had inherited from his family. It looks very funny, but it is so perfectly balanced a gait that you can fly off from it at any angle you please, and in dealing with snakes this is an advantage. If Rikki-tikki

had only known, he was doing a much more dangerous thing than fighting Nag for Karait is so small, and can turn so quickly, that unless Rikki bit him close to the back of the head, he would get the return-stroke in his eye or lip. But Rikki did not know: his eyes were all red, and he rocked back and forth, looking for a good place to hold. Karait struck out. Rikki jumped sideways and tried to run in, but the wicked little dusty gray head lashed within a fraction of his shoulder, and he had to jump over the body, and the head followed his heels close.

Teddy shouted to the house: “Oh, look here! Our mongoose is killing a snake”; and Rikki-tikki heard a scream from Teddy’s mother. His father ran out with a stick, but by the time he came up, Karait had lunged out once too far, and Rikki-tikki had sprung, jumped on the snake’s back, dropped his head far between his fore legs, bitten as high up the back as he could get hold, and rolled away. That bite paralyzed Karait, and Rikki-tikki was just going to eat him up from the tail, after the custom of his family at dinner, when he remembered that a full meal makes a slow mongoose, and if he wanted all his strength and quickness ready, he must keep himself thin.

He went away for a dust-bath under the castor-oil bushes, while Teddy’s father beat the dead Karait. “What is the use of that?” thought Rikki-tikki. “I have settled it all”; and then Teddy’s mother picked him up from the dust and hugged him, crying that he had saved Teddy from death, and Teddy’s father said that he was a providence, and Teddy looked on with big scared eyes. Rikki-tikki was rather amused at all the fuss, which, of course, he did not understand. Teddy’s mother might just as well have petted Teddy for playing in the dust. Rikki was thoroughly enjoying himself.

That night, at dinner, walking to and fro among the wineglasses on the table, he could have stuffed himself three times over with nice things; but he remembered Nag and Nagaina, and though it was very pleasant to be patted and petted by Teddy’s mother, and to sit on Teddy’s shoulder, his eyes would get red from time to time, and he would go off into his long war-cry of “*Rikk-tikk-tikki-tikki-tchk!*”

Teddy carried him off to bed, and insisted on Rikki-tikki sleeping under his chin. Rikki-tikki was too well bred to bite or scratch, but as soon as Teddy was asleep he went off for his nightly walk round the house, and in the dark he ran up against Chuchundra, the muskrat, creeping round by the wall. Chuchundra is a broken-hearted little beast. He whimpers and cheeps all the night, trying to make up his mind to run into the middle of the room, but he never gets there.

“Don’t kill me,” said Chuchundra, almost weeping. “Rikki-tikki, don’t kill me.”

“Do you think a snake-killer kills muskrats?” said Rikki-tikki scornfully.

“Those who kill snakes get killed by snakes,” said Chuchundra, more sorrowfully than ever. “And how am I to be sure that Nag won’t mistake me for you some dark night?”

“There’s not the least danger,” said Rikki-tikki; “but Nag is in the garden, and I know you don’t go there.”

“My cousin Chua, the rat, told me—” said Chuchundra, and then he stopped.

“Told you what?”

“H’sh! Nag is everywhere, Rikki-tikki. You should have talked to Chua in the garden.”

“I didn’t—so you must tell me. Quick, Chuchundra, or I’ll bite you!”

Chuchundra sat down and cried till the tears rolled off his whiskers. “I am a very poor man,” he sobbed. “I never had spirit enough to run out into the middle of the room. H’sh! I mustn’t tell you anything. Can’t you *hear*, Rikki-tikki?”

Rikki-tikki listened. The house was as still as still, but he thought he could just catch the faintest *scratch-scratch* in the world,—a noise as faint as that of a wasp walking on a window-pane,—the dry scratch of a snake’s scales on brickwork.

“That’s Nag or Nagaina,” he said to himself; “and he is crawling into the bath-room sluice. You’re right, Chuchundra; I should have talked to Chua.”

He stole off to Teddy’s bath-room, but there was nothing there, and then to Teddy’s mother’s bath-room. At the bottom of the smooth plaster wall there was a brick pulled out to make a sluice for the bath-water, and as Rikki-tikki stole in by the masonry curb where the bath is put, he heard Nag and Nagaina whispering together outside in the moonlight.

“When the house is emptied of people,” said Nagaina to her husband, “he will have to go away, and then the garden will be our own again. Go in quietly,

and remember that the big man who killed Karait is the first one to bite. Then come out and tell me, and we will hunt for Rikki-tikki together.”

“But are you sure that there is anything to be gained by killing the people?” said Nag.

“Everything. When there were no people in the bungalow, did we have any mongoose in the garden? So long as the bungalow is empty, we are king and queen of the garden; and remember that as soon as our eggs in the melon-bed hatch (as they may to-morrow), our children will need room and quiet.”

“I had not thought of that” said Nag. “I will go, but there is no need that we should hunt for Rikki-tikki afterward. I will kill the big man and his wife, and the child if I can, and come away quietly. Then the bungalow will be empty, and Rikki-tikki will go.”

Rikki-tikki tingled all over with rage and hatred at this, and then Nag’s head came through the sluice, and his five feet of cold body followed it. Angry as he was, Rikki-tikki was very frightened as he saw the size of the big cobra. Nag coiled himself up, raised his head, and looked into the bathroom in the dark, and Rikki could see his eyes glitter.

“Now, if I kill him here, Nagaina will know; and if I fight him on the open floor, the odds are in his favour. What am I to do?” said Rikki-tikki-tavi.

Nag waved to and fro, and then Rikki-tikki heard him drinking from the biggest water-jar that was used to fill the bath. “That is good,” said the snake. “Now, when Karait was killed, the big man had a stick. He may have that stick still, but when he comes in to bathe in the morning he will not have a stick. I shall wait here till he comes. Nagaina—do you hear me?—I shall wait here in the cool till daytime.”

There was no answer from outside, so Rikki-tikki knew Nagaina had gone away. Nag coiled himself down, coil by coil, round the bulge at the bottom of the water-jar, and Rikki-tikki stayed still as death. After an hour he began to move, muscle by muscle, toward the jar. Nag was asleep, and Rikki-tikki looked at his big back, wondering which would be the best place for a good hold. “If I don’t break his back at the first jump,” said Rikki, “he can still fight; and if he fights— O Rikki!” He looked at the thickness of the neck below the hood, but that was too much for him; and a bite near the tail would only make Nag savage.

“It must be the head,” he said at last; “the head above the hood; and, when I am once there, I must not let go.”

Then he jumped. The head was lying a little clear of the water-jar, under the curve of it; and, as his teeth met, Rikki braced his back against the bulge of the red earthenware to hold down the head. This gave him just one second’s purchase, and he made the most of it. Then he was battered to and fro as a rat is shaken by a dog—to and fro on the floor, up and down, and round in great circles; but his eyes were red, and he held on as the body cart-whipped over the floor, upsetting the tin dipper and the soap-dish and the flesh-brush, and banged against the tin side of the bath. As he held he closed his jaws tighter and tighter, for he made sure he would be banged to death, and, for the honour of his family, he preferred to be found with his teeth locked. He was dizzy, aching, and felt shaken to pieces when something went off like a thunder-clap just behind him; a hot wind knocked him senseless and red fire singed his fur. The big man had been wakened by the noise, and had fired both barrels of a shotgun into Nag just behind the hood.

Rikki-tikki held on with his eyes shut, for now he was quite sure he was dead; but the head did not move, and the big man picked him up and said: “It’s the mongoose again, Alice; the little chap has saved our lives now.” Then Teddy’s mother came in with a very white face, and saw what was left of Nag, and Rikki-tikki dragged himself to Teddy’s bedroom and spent half the rest of the night shaking himself tenderly to find out whether he really was broken into forty pieces, as he fancied.

When morning came he was very stiff, but well pleased with his doings. “Now I have Nagaina to settle with, and she will be worse than five Nags, and there’s no knowing when the eggs she spoke of will hatch. Goodness! I must go and see Darzee,” he said.

Without waiting for breakfast, Rikki-tikki ran to the thorn-bush where Darzee was singing a song of triumph at the top of his voice. The news of Nag’s death was all over the garden, for the sweeper had thrown the body on the rubbish-heap.

“Oh, you stupid tuft of feathers!” said Rikki-tikki, angrily. “Is this the time to sing?”

“Nag is dead—is dead—is dead!” sang Darzee. “The valiant Rikki-tikki caught him by the head and held fast. The big man brought the bang-stick and Nag fell

in two pieces! He will never eat my babies again.”

“All that’s true enough; but where’s Nagaina?” said Rikki-tikki, looking carefully round him.

“Nagaina came to the bath-room sluice and called for Nag,” Darzee went on; “and Nag came out on the end of a stick—the sweeper picked him up on the end of a stick and threw him upon the rubbish-heap. Let us sing about the great, the red-eyed Rikki-tikki!” and Darzee filled his throat and sang.

“If I could get up to your nest, I’d roll all your babies out!” said Rikki-tikki. “You don’t know when to do the right thing at the right time. You’re safe enough in your nest there, but it’s war for me down here. Stop singing a minute, Darzee.”

“For the great, the beautiful Rikki-tikki’s sake I will stop,” said Darzee. “What is it, O Killer of the terrible Nag?”

“Where is Nagaina, for the third time?”

“On the rubbish-heap by the stables, mourning for Nag. Great is Rikki-tikki with the white teeth.”

“Bother my white teeth! Have you ever heard where she keeps her eggs?”

“In the melon-bed, on the end nearest the wall, where the sun strikes nearly all day. She had them there weeks ago.”

“And you never thought it worth while to tell me? The end nearest the wall, you said?”

“Rikki-tikki, you are not going to eat her eggs?”

“Not eat exactly; no. Darzee, if you have a grain of sense you will fly off to the stables and pretend that your wing is broken, and let Nagaina chase you away to this bush! I must get to the melon-bed, and if I went there now she’d see me.”

Darzee was a feather-brained little fellow who could never hold more than one idea at a time in his head; and just because he knew that Nagaina’s children were born in eggs like his own, he didn’t think at first that it was fair to

kill them. But his wife was a sensible bird, and she knew that cobras' eggs meant young cobras later on; so she flew off from the nest, and left Darzee to keep the babies warm, and continue his song about the death of Nag. Darzee was very like a man in some ways.

She fluttered in front of Nagaina by the rubbish-heap, and cried out, "Oh, my wing is broken! The boy in the house threw a stone at me and broke it." Then she fluttered more desperately than ever.

Nagaina lifted up her head and hissed, "You warned Rikki-tikki when I would have killed him. Indeed and truly, you've chosen a bad place to be lame in." And she moved toward Darzee's wife, slipping along over the dust.

"The boy broke it with a stone!" shrieked Darzee's wife.

"Well! It may be some consolation to you when you're dead to know that I shall settle accounts with the boy. My husband lies on the rubbish-heap this morning, but before night the boy in the house will lie very still. What is the use of running away? I am sure to catch you. Little fool, look at me!"

Darzee's wife knew better than to do *that*, for a bird who looks at a snake's eyes gets so frightened that she cannot move. Darzee's wife fluttered on, piping sorrowfully, and never leaving the ground, and Nagaina quickened her pace.

Rikki-tikki heard them going up the path from the stables, and he raced for the end of the melon-patch near the wall. There, in the warm litter about the melons, very cunningly hidden, he found twenty-five eggs, about the size of a bantam's eggs, but with whitish skin instead of shell.

"I was not a day too soon," he said; for he could see the baby cobras curled up inside the skin, and he knew that the minute they were hatched they could each kill a man or a mongoose. He bit off the tops of the eggs as fast as he could, taking care to crush the young cobras, and turned over the litter from time to time to see whether he had missed any. At last there were only three eggs left, and Rikki-tikki began to chuckle to himself, when he heard Darzee's wife screaming:

"Rikki-tikki, I led Nagaina toward the house, and she has gone into the veranda, and—oh, come quickly—she means killing!"

Rikki-tikki smashed two eggs, and tumbled backward down the melon-bed with the third egg in his mouth, and scuttled to the veranda as hard as he could put foot to the ground. Teddy and his mother and father were there at early breakfast; but Rikki-tikki saw that they were not eating anything. They sat stone-still, and their faces were white. Nagaina was coiled up on the matting by Teddy's chair, within easy striking distance of Teddy's bare leg, and she was swaying to and fro singing a song of triumph.

"Son of the big man that killed Nag," she hissed, "stay still. I am not ready yet. Wait a little. Keep very still, all you three. If you move I strike, and if you do not move I strike. Oh, foolish people, who killed my Nag!"

Teddy's eyes were fixed on his father, and all his father could do was to whisper, "Sit still, Teddy. You mustn't move. Teddy, keep still."

Then Rikki-tikki came up and cried: "Turn round, Nagaina; turn and fight!"

"All in good time," said she, without moving her eyes. "I will settle my account with *you* presently. Look at your friends, Rikki-tikki. They are still and white; they are afraid. They dare not move, and if you come a step nearer I strike."

"Look at your eggs," said Rikki-tikki, "in the melon-bed near the wall. Go and look, Nagaina."

The big snake turned half round, and saw the egg on the veranda. "Ah-h! Give it to me," she said.

Rikki-tikki put his paws one on each side of the egg, and his eyes were blood-red. "What price for a snake's egg? For a young cobra? For a young king-cobra? For the last—the very last of the brood? The ants are eating all the others down by the melon-bed."

Nagaina spun clear round, forgetting everything for the sake of the one egg; and Rikki-tikki saw Teddy's father shoot out a big hand, catch Teddy by the shoulder and drag him across the little table with the tea-cups, safe and out of reach of Nagaina.

"Tricked! Tricked! Tricked! *Rikk-tck-tck!*" chuckled Rikki-tikki. "The boy is safe, and it was I—I—I that caught Nag by the hood last night in the bath-room." Then he began to jump up and down, all four feet together, his head close to

the floor. "He threw me to and fro, but he could not shake me off. He was dead before the big man blew him in two. I did it. *Rikki-tikki-tck-tck!* Come then, Nagaina. Come and fight with me. You shall not be a widow long."

Nagaina saw that she had lost her chance of killing Teddy, and the egg lay between Rikki-tikki's paws. "Give me the egg, Rikki-tikki. Give me the last of my eggs, and I will go away and never come back," she said, lowering her hood.

"Yes, you will go away, and you will never come back; for you will go to the rubbish-heap with Nag. Fight, widow! The big man has gone for his gun! Fight!"

Rikki-tikki was bounding all around Nagaina, keeping just out of the reach of her stroke, his little eyes like hot coals. Nagaina gathered herself together, and flung out at him. Rikki-tikki jumped up and backward. Again and again she struck, and each time her head came with a whack on the matting of the veranda and she gathered herself together like a watch-spring. Then Rikki-tikki danced in a circle to get behind her, and Nagaina spun round to keep her head to his head, so that the rustle of her tail on the matting sounded like dry leaves blown along by the wind.

He had forgotten the egg. It still lay on the veranda, and Nagaina came nearer and nearer to it, till at last, while Rikki-tikki was drawing breath, she caught it in her mouth, turned to the veranda steps, and flew like an arrow down the path, with Rikki-tikki behind her. When the cobra runs for her life, she goes like a whiplash flicked across a horse's neck.

Rikki-tikki knew that he must catch her, or all the trouble would begin again. She headed straight for the long grass by the thorn-bush, and as he was running Rikki-tikki heard Darzee still singing his foolish little song of triumph. But Darzee's wife was wiser. She flew off her nest as Nagaina came along, and flapped her wings about Nagaina's head. If Darzee had helped they might have turned her; but Nagaina only lowered her hood and went on. Still, the instant's delay brought Rikki-tikki up to her, and as she plunged into the rat-hole where she and Nag used to live, his little white teeth were clenched on her tail, and he went down with her—and very few mongooses, however wise and old they may be, care to follow a cobra into its hole. It was dark in the hole; and Rikki-tikki never knew when it might open out and give Nagaina room to turn and strike at him. He held on savagely, and struck out his feet to act as brakes on the dark slope of the hot, moist earth.

Then the grass by the mouth of the hole stopped waving, and Darzee said: "It is all over with Rikki-tikki! We must sing his death-song. Valiant Rikki-tikki is dead! For Nagaina will surely kill him underground."

So he sang a very mournful song that he made up all on the spur of the minute, and just as he got to the most touching part the grass quivered again, and Rikki-tikki, covered with dirt, dragged himself out of the hole leg by leg, licking his whiskers. Darzee stopped with a little shout. Rikki-tikki shook some of the dust out of his fur and sneezed. "It is all over," he said. "The widow will never come out again." And the red ants that live between the grass stems heard him, and began to troop down one after another to see if he had spoken the truth.

Rikki-tikki curled himself up in the grass and slept where he was—slept and slept till it was late in the afternoon, for he had done a hard day's work.

"Now," he said, when he awoke, "I will go back to the house. Tell the Coppersmith, Darzee, and he will tell the garden that Nagaina is dead."

The Coppersmith is a bird who makes a noise exactly like the beating of a little hammer on a copper pot; and the reason he is always making it is because he is the town-crier to every Indian garden, and tells all the news to everybody who cares to listen. As Rikki-tikki went up the path, he heard his "attention" notes like a tiny dinner-gong; and then the steady "*Ding-dong-tock!* Nag is dead—*dong!* Nagaina is dead! *Ding-dong-tock!*" That set all the birds in the garden singing, and the frogs croaking; for Nag and Nagaina used to eat frogs as well as little birds.

When Rikki got to the house, Teddy and Teddy's mother (she looked very white still, for she had been fainting) and Teddy's father came out and almost cried over him; and that night he ate all that was given him till he could eat no more, and went to bed on Teddy's shoulder, where Teddy's mother saw him when she came to look late at night.

"He saved our lives and Teddy's life," she said to her husband. "Just think, he saved all our lives."

Rikki-tikki woke up with a jump, for all the mongooses are light sleepers.

"Oh, it's you," said he. "What are you bothering for? All the cobras are dead; and if they weren't I'm here."

Rikki-tikki had a right to be proud of himself; but he did not grow too proud, and he kept that garden as a mongoose should keep it, with tooth and jump and spring and bite, till never a cobra dared show its head inside the walls.

Darzee's Chaunt

(Sung in Honour of Rikki-tikki-tavi)

*Singer and tailor am I—
Doubled the joys that I know—
Proud of my lilt through the sky,
Proud of the house that I sew—
Over and under, so weave I my music—so weave I the house
that I sew.*

*Sing to your fledglings again,
Mother, oh lift up your head!
Evil that plagued us is slain,
Death in the garden lies dead.
Terror that hid in the roses is impotent—flung on the dung-
hill and dead!*

*Who hath delivered us, who?
Tell me his nest and his name.
Rikki, the valiant, the true,
Tikki, with eyeballs of flame.
Rik-tikki-tikki, the ivory-fanged, the hunter with eyeballs of
flame.*

*Give him the Thanks of the Birds,
Bowling with tail-feathers spread!
Praise him with nightingale words—
Nay, I will praise him instead.
Hear! I will sing you the praise of the bottle-tailed Rikki,
with eyeballs of red!*

(Here Rikki-tikki interrupted, and the rest of the song is lost.)

The Social Life of the Newt

Robert C. Benchley

It is not generally known that the newt, although one of the smallest of our North American animals, has an extremely happy home-life. It is just one of those facts which never get bruited about.

I first became interested in the social phenomena of newt life early in the spring of 1913, shortly after I had finished my researches in sexual differentiation among ameba. Since that time I have practically lived among newts, jotting down observations, making lantern-slides, watching them in their work and in their play (and you may rest assured that the little rogues have their play—as who does not?) until, from much lying in a research posture on my stomach, over the inclosure in which they were confined, I found myself developing what I feared might be rudimentary creepers. And so, late this autumn, I stood erect and walked into my house, where I immediately set about the compilation of the notes I had made.

So much for the non-technical introduction. The remainder of this article bids fair to be fairly scientific.

In studying the more intimate phases of newt life, one is chiefly impressed with the methods by means of which the males force their attentions upon the females, with matrimony as an object. For the newt is, after all, only a newt, and has his weaknesses just as any of the rest of us. And I, for one, would not have it different. There is little enough fun in the world as it is.

The peculiar thing about a newt's courtship is its restraint. It is carried on, at all times, with a minimum distance of fifty paces (newt measure) between the male and the female. Some of the bolder males may now and then attempt to overstep the bounds of good sportsmanship and crowd in to forty-five paces, but such tactics are frowned upon by the Rules Committee. To the eye of an uninitiated observer, the pair might be dancing a few of the more open figures of the minuet.

The means employed by the males to draw the attention and win the affection of those of the opposite sex (females) are varied and extremely strategic. Until the valuable researches by Strudlehoff in 1887 (in his

“*Entwicklungsmechanik*”) no one had been able to ascertain just what it was that the male newt did to make the female see anything in him worth throwing herself away on. It had been observed that the most personally unattractive newt could advance to within fifty paces of a female of his acquaintance and, by some *coup d’œil*, bring her to a point where she would, in no uncertain terms, indicate her willingness to go through with the marriage ceremony at an early date.

It was Strudlehoff who discovered, after watching several thousand courting newts under a magnifying lens (questionable taste on his part, without doubt, but all is fair in pathological love) that the male, during the courting season (the season opens on the tenth of March and extends through the following February, leaving about ten days for general overhauling and redecorating) gives forth a strange, phosphorescent glow from the center of his highly colored dorsal crest, somewhat similar in effect to the flash of a diamond scarf-pin in a red necktie. This glow, according to Strudlehoff, so fascinates the female with its air of elegance and indication of wealth, that she immediately falls a victim to its lure.

But the little creature, true to her sex-instinct, does not at once give evidence that her morale has been shattered. She affects a coyness and lack of interest, by hitching herself sideways along the bottom of the aquarium, with her head turned over her right shoulder away from the swain. A trained ear might even detect her whistling in an indifferent manner.

The male, in the meantime, is flashing his gleamer frantically two blocks away and is performing all sorts of attractive feats, calculated to bring the lady newt to terms. I have seen a male, in the stress of his handicap courtship, stand on his fore-feet, gesticulating in amorous fashion with his hind feet in the air. Franz Ingehalt, in his “*Über Weltschmerz des Newt*,” recounts having observed a distinct and deliberate undulation of the body, beginning with the shoulders and ending at the filament of the tail, which might well have been the origin of what is known to-day in scientific circles as “the shimmy.” The object seems to be the same, except that in the case of the newt, it is the male who is the active agent.

In order to test the power of observation in the male during these maneuvers, I carefully removed the female, for whose benefit he was undulating, and put in her place, in slow succession, another (but less charming) female, a paper-weight of bronze shaped like a newt, and, finally, a common rubber

eraser. From the distance at which the courtship was being carried on, the male (who was, it must be admitted, a bit near-sighted congenitally) was unable to detect the change in personnel, and continued, even in the presence of the rubber eraser, to gyrate and undulate in a most conscientious manner, still under the impression that he was making a conquest.

At last, worn out by his exertions, and disgusted at the meagerness of the reaction on the eraser, he gave a low cry of rage and despair and staggered to a nearby pan containing barley-water, from which he proceeded to drink himself into a gross stupor.

Thus, little creature, did your romance end, and who shall say that its ending was one whit less tragic than that of Camille? Not I, for one.... In fact, the two cases are not at all analogous.

And now that we have seen how wonderfully Nature works in the fulfilment of her laws, even among her tiniest creatures, let us study for a minute a cross-section of the community-life of the newt. It is a life full of all kinds of exciting adventure, from weaving nests to crawling about in the sun and catching insect larvæ and crustaceans. The newt's day is practically never done, largely because the insect larvæ multiply three million times as fast as the newt can possibly catch and eat them. And it takes the closest kind of community team-work in the newt colony to get things anywhere near cleaned up by nightfall.

It is early morning, and the workers are just appearing, hurrying to the old log which is to be the scene of their labors. What a scampering! What a bustle! Ah, little scamperers! Ah, little bustlers! How lucky you are, and how wise! You work long hours, without pay, for the sheer love of working. An ideal existence, I'll tell the scientific world.

Over here on the right of the log are the Master Draggers. Of all the newt workers, they are the most futile, which is high praise indeed. Come, let us look closer and see what it is that they are doing.

The one in the lead is dragging a bit of gurry out from the water and up over the edge into the sunlight. Following him, in single file, come the rest of the Master Draggers. They are not dragging anything, but are sort of helping the leader by crowding against him and eating little pieces out of the filament of his tail.

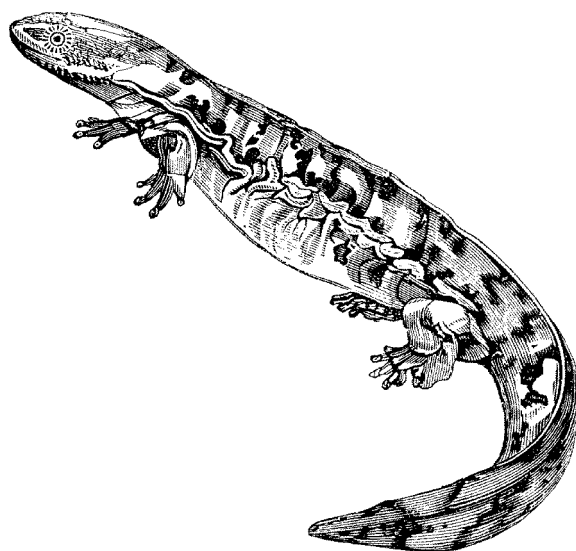
And now they have reached the top. The leader, by dint of much leg-work, has succeeded in dragging his prize to the ridge of the log.

The little workers, reaching the goal with their precious freight, are now giving it over to the Master Pushers, who have been waiting for them in the sun all this while. The Master Pushers' work is soon accomplished, for it consists simply in pushing the piece of gurry over the other side of the log until it falls with a splash into the water, where it is lost.

This part of their day's task finished, the tiny toilers rest, clustered together in a group, waving their heads about from side to side, as who should say: "There—that's done!" And so it *is* done, my little Master Draggers and my little Master Pushers, and *well* done, too. Would that my own work were as clean-cut and as satisfying.

And so it goes. Day in and day out, the busy army of newts go on making the world a better place in which to live. They have their little trials and tragedies, it is true, but they also have their fun, as any one can tell by looking at a logful of sleeping newts on a hot summer day.

And, after all, what more has life to offer?



The Snake

Stephen Crane

Where the path wended across the ridge, the bushes of huckleberry and sweet fern swarmed at it in two curling waves until it was a mere winding line traced through a tangle. There was no interference by clouds, and as the rays of the sun fell full upon the ridge, they called into voice innumerable insects which chanted the heat of the summer day in steady, throbbing, unending chorus.

A man and a dog came from the laurel thickets of the valley where the white brook brawled with the rocks. They followed the deep line of the path across the ridge. The dog—a large lemon-and-white setter—walked, tranquilly meditative, at his master's heels.

Suddenly from some unknown and yet near place in advance there came a dry, shrill, whistling rattle that smote motion instantly from the limbs of the man and the dog, like the fingers of a sudden death, this sound seemed to touch the man at the nape of the neck, at the top of the spine, and change him, as swift as thought, to a statue of listening horror, surprise, rage. The dog, too—the same icy hand was laid upon him, and he stood crouched and quivering, his jaw dropping, the froth of terror upon his lips, the light of hatred in his eyes.

Slowly the man moved his hands toward the bushes, but his glance did not turn from the place made sinister by the warning rattle. His fingers, unguided, sought for a stick of weight and strength. Presently they closed about one that seemed adequate, and holding this weapon poised before him, the man moved slowly forward, glaring. The dog, with his nervous nostrils fairly fluttering, moved warily, one foot at a time, after his master.

But when the man came upon the snake, his body underwent a shock as if from a revelation, as if after all he had been ambushed. With a blanched face, he sprang forward, and his breath came in strained gasps, his chest heaving as if he were in the performance of an extraordinary muscular trial. His aim with the stick made a spasmodic, defensive gesture.

The snake had apparently been crossing the path in some mystic travel when to his sense there came the knowledge of the coming of his foes. The dull

vibration perhaps informed him, and he flung his body to face the danger. He had no knowledge of paths; he had no wit to tell him to slink noiselessly into the bushes. He knew that his implacable enemies were approaching; no doubt they were seeking him, hunting him. And so he cried his cry, an incredibly swift jangle of tiny bells, as burdened with pathos as the hammering upon quaint cymbals by the Chinese at war—for, indeed, it was usually his death music.

“Beware! Beware! Beware!”

The man and the snake confronted each other. In the man’s eyes were hatred and fear. In the snake’s eyes were hatred and fear. These enemies maneuvered, each preparing to kill. It was to be a battle without mercy. Neither knew of mercy for such a situation. In the man was all the wild strength of the terror of his ancestors, of his race, of his kind. A deadly repulsion had been handed from man to man through long dim centuries. This was another detail of a war that had begun evidently when first there were men and snakes. Individuals who do not participate in this strife incur the investigations of scientists. Once there was a man and a snake who were friends, and at the end, the man lay dead with the marks of the snake’s caress just over his East Indian heart. In the formation of devices, hideous and horrible, Nature reached her supreme point in the making of the snake, so that priests who really paint hell well fill it with snakes instead of fire. These curving forms, these scintillant colorings create at once, upon sight, more relentless animosities than do shake barbaric tribes. To be born a snake is to be thrust into a place a-swarm with formidable foes. To gain an appreciation of it, view hell as pictured by priests who are really skillful.

As for this snake in the pathway, there was a double curve some inches back of its head, which, merely by the potency of its lines, made the man feel with tenfold eloquence the touch of the death-fingers at the nape of his neck. The reptile’s head was waving slowly from side to side and its hot eyes flashed like little murder-lights. Always in the air was the dry, shrill whistling of the rattles.

“Beware! Beware! Beware!”

The man made a preliminary feint with his stick. Instantly the snake’s heavy head and neck were bent back on the double curve and instantly the snake’s body shot forward in a low, straight, hard spring. The man jumped with a convulsive chatter and swung his stick. The blind, sweeping blow fell upon the

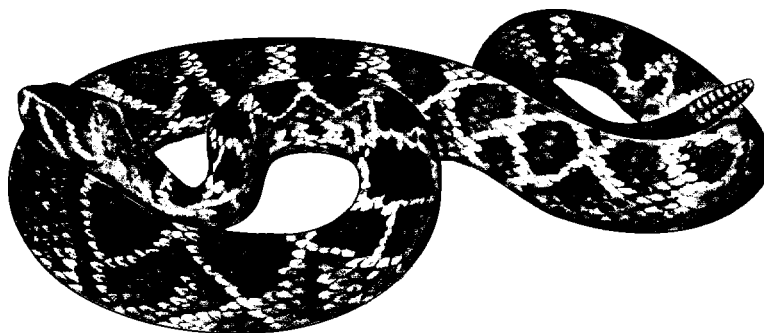
snake's head and hurled him so that steel-colored plates were for a moment uppermost. But he rallied swiftly, agilely, and again the head and neck bent back to the double curve, and the steaming, wide-open mouth made its desperate effort to reach its enemy. This attack, it could be seen, was despairing, but it was nevertheless impetuous, gallant, ferocious, of the same quality as the charge of the lone chief when the walls of white faces close upon him in the mountains. The stick swung unerringly again, and the snake, mutilated, torn, whirled himself into the last coil.

And now the man went sheer raving mad from the emotions of his forefathers and from his own. He came to close quarters. He gripped the stick with his two hands and made it speed like a flail. The snake, tumbling in the anguish of final despair, fought, bit, flung itself upon this stick which was taking its life.

At the end, the man clutched his stick and stood watching in silence. The dog came slowly, and with infinite caution stretched his nose forward, sniffing. The hair upon his neck and back moved and ruffled as if a sharp wind was blowing. The last muscular quivers of the snake were causing the rattles to still sound their treble cry, the shrill, ringing war chant and hymn of the grave of the thing that faces foes at once countless, implacable, and superior.

"Well, Rover," said the man, turning to the dog with a grin of victory, "we'll carry Mr. Snake home to show the girls."

His hands still trembled from the strain of the encounter, but he pried with his stick under the body of the snake and hoisted the limp thing upon it. He resumed his march along the path, and the dog walked, tranquilly meditative, at his master's heels.



The Tortoise

William Fryer Harvey

One word as to the documentary part of my story.

The letter was written by Tollerton, the butler, five weeks before his death. Sandys, to whom he addressed it, was, I believe, his brother; in any case the man was not known at Revelstoke Mansions, and the letter came back to Baldby Manor unopened.

I read it twice before it dawned upon me that the man was writing of himself. I then remembered the diary which, with the rest of his belongings, had never been claimed. Each partly explains the other. Nothing to my mind will ever explain the tortoise.

Here is the letter—

“Baldby Manor.

“My Dear Tom.—You asked in your last for particulars. I suppose, as the originator of the story, I am the only person able to supply them, but the task is rather hard. First as to the safety of the hero. You need not be alarmed about that; my stories have always ended happily.

“You wonder how it all came about so successfully. Let me give you the general hang of the plot. To begin with, the man was old, a miser, and consequently eccentric. The villain of the piece (the same in this case as the hero, you know) wanted money badly, and moreover knew where the money was kept.

“Do you remember Oppenheim’s *Forensic Medicine*, and how we used to laugh over the way they always bungled these jobs? There was no bungling here, and consequently no use for the luck that attended the hero. (I still think of him as hero, you see; each man is a hero to himself.)

“The victim occasionally saw the doctor, and the doctor knew

that the old fellow was suffering from a disease which might end suddenly. The hero knew what the graver symptoms of the disease were, and with diabolical cunning told the doctor's coachman how his master had begun to complain, but refused to see any medical man. Three days later that 'intelligent old butler—I rather think he must have come down in the world, poor fellow'—is stopped in the village street by Æsculapius.

“How is your master, John?’ ‘Very bad, sir.’ Then follows an accurate account of signs and symptoms, carefully cribbed up from old Banks's Handbook. Æsculapius is alarmed at the gravity of the case, but delighted at the accuracy of the observations. The butler suggests that an unofficial visit should be paid on the morrow; he complains of the responsibility. Æsculapius replies that he was about to suggest the very same thing himself. ‘I fear I can do little,’ he adds as he drives away.

“The old man sleeps soundly at night. The butler goes his usual round at twelve, and enters his master's room to make up the fire, and then—well, after all the rest can be imagined. De Quincey himself would have approved of the tooling, cotton-wool wrapped in a silk handkerchief. There was no subsequent bleeding, no fracture of the hyoid or thyroid, and this because the operator remembered that aphorism in Oppenheim, that murderers use unnecessary violence. Only gold is taken, and only a relatively small quantity. I have invented another aphorism: The temperate man is never caught.

“Next day the butler enters the bedroom with his master's breakfast. The tray drops to the floor with a crash, he tugs frantically at the bell-rope, and the servants rush into the room. The groom is sent off post haste for help. The doctor comes, shakes his head, and says, ‘I told you so; I always feared the end would be this!’

“Even if there had been an inquest, nothing would have been discovered. The only thing at all suspicious was a slight hæmorrhage into the right conjunctiva, and that would be at best a very doubtful sign.

“The butler stays on; he is re-engaged by the new occupier, a

half-pay captain, who has the sincerity not to bemoan his cousin's death.

“And here comes a little touch of tragedy. When the will is read, a sum of two hundred pounds is left to John the butler, as ‘some slight reward for faithful service rendered.’ Question for debate: ‘Would a knowledge of the will have induced a different course of action?’ It is difficult to decide. The man was seventy-seven and almost in his dotage, and, as you say, the option of taking up those copper shares is not a thing to be lightly laid aside.

“It's not a bad story, is it? But I am surprised at your wanting to hear more than I told you at first. One of the captain's friends—I have forgotten his name—met you last winter in Nice; he described you as ‘respectability embalmed.’ We hear all these things in the servants' hall. That I got from the parlourmaid, who was uncertain of the meaning of the phrase. Well, so long. I shall probably chuck this job at the end of the year.

“*P.S.*—Invest anything that is over in Arbutos Rubbers. They are somewhere about 67 at present, but from a straight tip I overheard in the smoke-room, they are bound to rise.”

That is the letter. What follows are extracts from Tollerton's diary.

“Kingsett came in this morning with a large tortoise they had found in the kitchen-garden. I suppose it is one of the half-dozen Sir James let loose a few years ago. The gardeners are always turning them out, like the ploughshares did the skulls in that rotten poem we used to learn at school about the battle of Blenheim. This one I haven't seen before. He's much bigger than the others, a magnificent specimen of *Chelonia* what's-its-name.

“They brought it into the conservatory and gave it some milk, but the beast was not thirsty. It crawled to the back of the hot-water pipes, and there it will remain until the children come back from their aunt's. They are rather jolly little specimens, and like me are fond of animals.

.....

“The warmth must have aroused the tortoise from its lethargy, for this morning I found it waddling across the floor of the hall. I took it with me into my pantry; it can sleep very well with the cockroaches in the bottom cupboard. I rather think tortoises are vegetable feeders, but I must look the matter up.

.....

“There is something fascinating in a tortoise. This one reminds one of a cat in a kennel. Its neck muscles are wonderfully active, especially the ones that withdraw the head. There is something quite feline in the eyes—wise eyes, unlike a dog’s in never for a moment betraying the purpose of the brain behind them.

.....

“The temperature of the pantry is exactly suited to the tortoise. He keeps awake and entertains me vastly, but has apparently no wish to try the draughty passages again. A cat in a kennel is a bad simile; he is more like a god in a shrine. The shrine is old, roofed with a great ivory dome. Only occasionally do the faithful see the dweller in the shrine, and then nothing but two eyes, all-seeing and all-knowing. The tortoise should have been worshipped by the Egyptians.

.....

“I still hear nothing from Tom; he ought to have replied by now. But he is one of those rare men whom one can trust implicitly. I often think of the events of the past two months, not at night, for I let nothing interfere with that excellent habit of sleeping within ten minutes from the time my head has touched the pillow, but in the daytime when my hands are busy over their work.

“I do not regret what I have done, though the two hundred would weigh on my mind if I allowed it to do so. I am thankful to say I bore my late master no ill-will. I never annoyed him; he always treated me civilly. If there had been spite or malice on my side I

should never have acted as I did, for death would only have removed him beyond my reach. I have found out by bitter experience that by fostering malice one forfeits that peaceable equanimity which to my mind is the crown of life, besides dwarfing one's nature. As it is, I can look back with content to the years we have spent together, and if in some future existence we should meet again, I, for my part, shall bear no grudge.

“Tortoises do not eat cockroaches. Mine has been shut up in a box for the last half-hour with three of the largest I can find. They are still undevoured.

.....

“Some day I shall write an essay upon tortoises, or has the thing been already botched by some one else? I should lead off with that excellent anecdote of Sydney Smith's. A child, if I remember, was found by that true-hearted divine stroking the back of a tortoise. ‘My dear,’ he said, ‘you might as well stroke the dome of St. Paul's in order to propitiate the Dean and Chapter.’ Tortoises are not animals to be fondled. They have too much dignity, they are far too aloof to be turned aside from their purpose by any of our passing whims.

.....

“The pantry has grown too warm, and the tortoise has taken to perambulating the passages, returning always at night to the cupboard. He seems to have been tacitly adopted as an indoor fixture, and what is more, he has been named. I named him. The subject cropped up at lunchtime. The captain suggested ‘Percy’ because he was so ‘Shelley,’ a poor sort of joke with which to honour the illustrious dead, but one which of course found favour with a table full of limerick makers. There followed a host of inappropriate suggestions. I am the last person to deny the right of an animal to a name, but there is invariably one name, and one name only, that is suitable. The guests seemed to think as I did, for all agreed that there was some one of whom the beast was the very image, not the vicar, not Dr. Baddely, not even Mrs. Gilchrist of the Crown. As they talked, I happened to notice an enlargement of

an old portrait of Sir James, which had just come back from being framed. It showed him seated in his bath-chair, the hood of which was drawn down. He was wrapped up in his great sealskin cape; his sealskin cap was on his head, with the flaps drawn close over his ears. His long, scraggy neck, covered with shrivelled skin, was bent forward, and his eyes shone dark and penetrating. He had not a vestige of eyebrow to shade their brilliance. The captain laughingly turned to me to end their dispute. The old man's name was on my lips. As it was, I stuttered out 'Jim,' and so Jim he is in the dining-room. He will never be anything else than Sir James in the butler's pantry.

"Tortoises do not drink milk; or, to avoid arguing from the particular to the general, Sir James does not drink milk, or indeed anything at all. If it were not so irreverent I should dearly like to try him with some of our old port.

.....

"The children have come back. The house is full of their laughter. Sir James, of course, was a favourite at once. They take him with them everywhere, in spite of his appalling weight. If I would let them they would be only too glad to keep him upstairs in the dolls'-house: as it is, the tortoise is in the nursery half the day, unless he is being induced to beat his own record from the night-nursery door to the end of the passage.

"I still have no news of Tom. I have made up my mind to give notice next month; I well deserve a holiday.

"Oh, I must not forget. Sir James does, as I thought, take port. One of the gentlemen drank too deep last night; I think it must have been the Admiral. Anyhow there was quite a pool of dark liquid on the floor that exactly suited my purpose. I brought Sir James in. He lapped it up in a manner that seemed to me uncanny. It is the first time I ever used that word, which, till now, has never conveyed any meaning to my mind. I must try him some day with hot rum and water.

.....

“I was almost forgetting the fable of the hare and the tortoise. That must certainly figure in my essay; for the steady plod plod of Sir James as he follows one (I have taught him to do that) would be almost pathetic if one did not remember that perseverance can never be pathetic, since perseverance means ultimate success. He reminds me of those old lines, I forget whose they are, but I think they must be Elizabethan—

‘Some think to lose him
By having him confined;
And some do suppose him,
Poor heart, to be blind;
But if ne’er so close ye wall him,
Do the best that ye may,
Blind love, if so ye call him,
He will find out his way.

‘There is no striving
To cross his intent;
There is no contriving
His plots to prevent;
But if once the message greet him
That his True Love doth stay,
If Death should come and meet him
Love will find out the way.’

“I have given notice. The captain was exceedingly kind. Kindness and considerate treatment to servants seem to belong to the family. He said that he was more than sorry to lose me, but quite understood my wish to settle down. He asked me if there was any favour he could do me. I told him yes, I should like to take ‘Jim’ with me. He seemed amused, but raised no objection, but I can imagine the stormy scenes in the nursery.

“Mem. important.—There is a broken rail in the balustrade on the top landing overlooking the hall. The captain has twice asked me to see to it, as he is afraid one of the children might slip through. Only the bottom part of the rail is broken, and there should be no fear of any accidents. I cannot think how with a good memory like mine I have forgotten to see to this.”

These are the only extracts from Tollerton's diary that have a bearing upon what followed. They are sufficient to show his extraordinary character, his strong imagination, and his stronger self-control.

I, the negligible half-pay captain of his story, little dreamed what sort of a man had served me so well as butler; but strange as his life had been, his death was stranger.

The hall at Baldby Manor is exceedingly lofty, extending the full height of the three-storied house. It is surrounded by three landings; from the uppermost a passage leads to the nursery. The day after the last entry in the diary I was crossing the hall on my way to the study, when I noticed the gap in the banisters. I could hear distinctly the children's voices as they played in the corridor. Doubly annoyed at Tollerton's carelessness (he was usually the promptest and most methodical of servants), I rang the bell. I could see at once that he was vexed at his own forgetfulness. "I made a note of it only last night," he said. Then as we looked upward a curious smile stole across his lips. "Do you see that?" he said, and pointed to the gap above. His sight was keener than mine, but I saw at last the thing that attracted his gaze—the two black eyes of the tortoise, the withered head, the long, protruded neck stretched out from the gap in the rail. "You'll excuse a liberty, sir, I hope, from an old servant, but don't you see the extraordinary resemblance between the tortoise and the old master? He's the very image of Sir James. Look at the portrait behind you." Half instinctively I turned. I must have passed the picture scores of times in the course of a day, I must have seen it in sunlight and lamplight, from every point of view; it was a clever picture, well painted, if the subject was not exactly a pleasing one, but that was all.

Yes, I knew at once what the butler meant. It was the eyes—no, the neck—that caused the resemblance, or was it both? together with the half-open mouth with its absence of teeth.

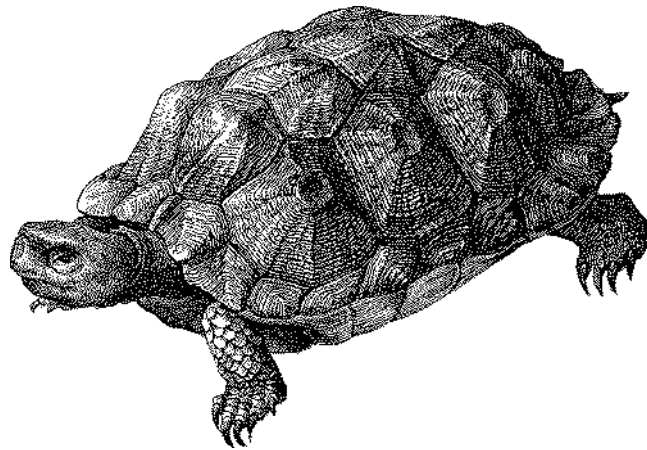
I had been used to think of the smile as having something akin to benevolence about it; time had seemed to be sweetening a nature once sour. Now I saw my mistake—the expression was wholly cynical. The eyes held me by their discerning power, the lips with their subtle mockery.

Suddenly the silence was broken by a cry of terror, followed by an awful crash.

I turned round in amazement.

The body of Tollerton lay stretched on the floor, strangely limp; in falling he had struck the corner of a heavy oak table.

His head lay in a little pool of blood, which the tortoise—I shudder as I think of it—was lapping greedily.



The Black Mamba

Lord Dunsany

Lunch was not yet over in the Billiards Club when, chancing to look through the window, I noticed that lights were appearing in other houses; not all at once, but furtively, as though aware that the hour was not yet come for any lesser lights, yet one by one they stole softly into the murkiness, and the darkness deepened around them as they came. It was late November.

These dark months of the winter in London are profitably passed by work, by giving more attention to business, by studying such things as conditions, and in many other ways, but at the Billiards Club we pay concentrated attention to stories of out-of-the-way parts of the world, or out-of-the-way events that one member or another has seen. And at this time of the year we particularly look to such entertainment from Jorkens, with the exception of one or two members who require everything to be proved as though Jorkens were on his trial in a court of law. And now Jorkens was with us, but silent, as he had been for several days, and so morose that he seemed to resent being spoken to; and he was eyeing other members with an attitude so malevolent that I gave up any hope of a story that bleak day, and concentrated instead on trying to get some apology from some of the members for whatever it was that had offended Jorkens. But, as Jorkens wouldn't speak, it was hard to find out who had insulted him.

I began by catching an eye here and an eye there among those at whom he was scowling, and suggesting to them, by a glance at the waiter, that they should offer Jorkens a whiskey. And this two or three of them did, and Jorkens refused them; so, having failed as a peacemaker, I tried to cheer him by offering him one myself. This he refused too: it was before him on a salver and he refused it, and saw it carried away out of the room. Some of us looked at each other, then at Jorkens, but not a glimpse of regret was there on his face, not a hint of recalling the waiter. And then the moroseness that had puzzled us for a fortnight, the trouble that I had so blunderingly tried to put right, was revealed in a single sentence.

“My doctor has forbidden me whiskey,” he said.

So that was it. What was to be done next? It was growing darker and darker

outside in the cold, and in another five minutes Bettin would tell a story, and that would only make everything worse; a long, long tale full of details, each one made vividly clear by an overwhelming veracity; there would be no turning him aside from it once he started. Could anything stir Jorkens to bring us any glimmer from the lands in which our November is unknown? He sipped at a tumbler of water, and I doubted it. There were many efforts to draw him, but with no success; in answer to some of them he never even grunted.

Then someone, talking of Africa, mentioned Somalis. At that, Jorkens looked up, alert, with his eyes flashing. He had found at last the enemy that his bitter mood needed in that bleak evening. He had no quarrel with any of us; but Somalis, they were the people for whom his fury was raging.

“Somalis!” he said. One word of contemptuous anger.

But one or two of us thought rather well of Somalis, and said so, in spite of Jorkens. In fact, barring the Masai, there is no tribe able to beat them through many a hundred miles of their part of Africa. But Jorkens only repeated their name with the same scorn and fury.

“What have the Somalis ever done to you?” said Terbut. And Jorkens, seeing that he had to defend himself for what we took as an unfair attitude, which was clear enough in his look and his bitter tones, calmed himself in a few moments, and said with a wistfulness I have not often heard in his voice:

“I’ve only really wanted one thing in my life, and the Somalis wouldn’t let me have it.”

Somehow the way he said it struck a quiet, even on Terbut, and he said quite gently to Jorkens: “What was it?”

“Sleep,” said Jorkens.

“Sleep?” we said, wondering that Jorkens had not wanted many things more.

But Jorkens’ eyes were away from us and the fog, looking back far through the past: “The Somalis,” he said. “They wouldn’t let me sleep.”

And somehow or other, when I saw that look on Jorkens’ face, I abused the Somalis, of whom I know little enough, and he seemed grateful for my trifling

support; and that is how, I think, we got the story, his first word, almost, for a fortnight.

“I was on a safari in East Africa, with a few Somali boys. I had chosen them, as I had been told that they were stouter fellows than the Kikuyus, in whose country I was; stouter indeed than most, and more likely to stick to you, if there was trouble, than almost any others. I had pitched my little camp and was standing just outside it, gazing at the view that I always keep in my memory, even here in this fog; while they finished getting the tents up.

“I was standing by the northern Guaso Nyero, a sluggish stream going through marshes: suddenly it leaps forward, like a fat horse hit by surprise, and roars downward to the very feet of the forest; and up from that raging fall and higher than the marshes from which it came, soar tier upon tier of cedars hugely bearded with moss. One red lily stood five feet high by the brink of the fall. I was looking silently at the scene below me, thinking of the beauty of Creation, when something struck me through my leather boot, in the upper part of the foot; and I knew it for a black mamba. I don't know how I knew it; I don't think I've ever seen one; and it was gone at once through the grasses; but I knew. It is one of the three deadliest snakes in Africa.

“Four of my Somalis were standing quite near, and I shouted to them, ‘I think black mamba. Look, see.’ And I pointed to the grasses where he had gone. But they only looked at me. Then one of them tied a tourniquet round my leg, which was quite the right thing to do. And one of them ran and got a knife from the camp, and came back with it and cut a bit at my foot. Well, I didn't mind that. And all the while they were watching my face.

“It was time to try my own remedy then, permanganate of potash, that I kept in my tent, thirty yards away. And they helped me there, for I was a bit lame from their cutting. And I began to wonder as I went whether their knife-work and tourniquet and my little permanganate crystals would ever be any use. You see, it was rather near a vein. Well, I sat on my bed and shoved the crystals in; and then, what with their cutting and the infernal permanganate, and the shock of that sudden bite while I was thinking of nothing of the sort, I felt like taking a bit of rest on my bed. They were all of them still looking at me; and as I lay down on the bed they said, ‘Black mamba.’

“They had none of them troubled to go and look in the grass where I showed them, but they looked at me now and said, ‘Black mamba,’ and nodded. Then

one of them slipped away: I caught the word 'fire' in their language: and I said to the other three, 'I'll rest a bit now.'

"They looked at one another. They lifted me off the bed, one at each arm. 'Walk,' they said; and we went out of the tent, with the third one coming behind me.

"Well, sick or fit, you can't give way to natives like that, or you'd lose all control over them for ever. So I just turned round to one of them, to put him in his place; and then that great yearning for sleep descended on me in earnest. I didn't speak to him. I left him to do what he liked. I didn't care if I never controlled them again. I didn't care if they dragged a white man about like an old sack of potatoes. I only wanted sleep. When they wouldn't stop walking and dragging me up and down I said: 'All right, I'm going to sleep here. Go on with your walk. I'm going to sleep.'

"I didn't mind. There was a sleepiness on me beyond anything I'd ever known. I didn't care where I slept, so long as I slept deep, and I dropped my head forward and dragged my feet and let them pull me along. I thought to be sound asleep in a couple of minutes. But I hadn't settled down to rest for four of their paces, when the Somali behind me (he was my gun-bearer, too) began to beat me on the calves of my legs, and on the tendon above the heel that they call the tendon Achilles: that hurt infernally. I moved my feet then to keep them out of his way, and so we went on for a while. It wasn't the movement that kept me awake, but what must have been the work of the will, to the extent necessary to move each foot; and after every footstep I hoped to sleep, but the damned fellow behind me never let one step pass, and if I didn't take each footstep he was hammering that bruised tendon with a stick.

"I think all this must have begun at sunset, for I know it was all clear daylight while I was standing watching the falls, but those terrible walks up and down were taken in dwindling light, and soon I saw bright firelight where one of the Somalis was sitting heating an iron. And the hyenas were yelling as they always do in honor of the equatorial sunset. For a while, by hurrying my steps, I kept just ahead of the stick of the man behind; but if I was the least slow, crash came the stick, and that intense pain again, always on the same part of the foot. And darkness all the while was coming on rapidly. But, more rapidly than night on the equator, was coming now a deeper yearning for sleep, so that all at once I saw that pain didn't matter. Let him batter my heels, I thought all of a sudden; let him cut them off; there was only one thing I wanted, and that was

sleep. So I let my feet drag again. And I saw then that I was right, pain did not matter, so long as I only had sleep. They shouted then to the man at the fire, sitting beside the cedar-logs, but he seemed not to be ready, and I thought I should beat them and get some sleep. And I very nearly did. They doubled their pace and tried new dodges, but I nearly beat them before the man came with the iron. It was a huge piece of iron, something to do with a wagon, and it wasn't yet ready. Nothing any longer had any interest for me whatever except sleep. Pain no longer mattered, and as for life, I wasn't thinking of the future but only of this one overwhelming need. My brains were growing heavy as gold and lead, but I could still use them. I turned first to the Somali that was holding my left arm. I offered him five head of cattle, and went to ten, before I saw that the damned fellow wouldn't take anything. Ten head of cattle for five minutes sleep. I turned to the other one then, the man that had hold of my right arm, and offered him fantastic numbers of oxen, a hundred of the best cattle in Kenya, to let me sleep for ten minutes. He was no good either. I'd paid them well, and treated them well, and fed them well, and never asked anything of them before; and now I only wanted this one thing. What was life to me? It was sleep I wanted.

“And then the other Somali came with the hot iron. It wasn't so easy to sleep after that. They shoved it into the hole they had cut round the snakebite. I might have got to sleep if they'd stopped at that. But they played all kinds of heathenish games with that iron, things that no right-minded civilized man would think of; and the only chance I had then of trying to get to sleep was whenever he went back to his fire of cedar to heat up the iron again. Damn them, I forgave them the torture; but neither then nor ever, have I forgiven them for frustrating that yearning. Now, don't tell me it was bad for me. I yearned for sleep, and never have I yearned for anything else so much. I hardly thought they could have beaten me; but they did. I hardly thought they had the guts to hold out against my determination, but they beat my will in the end; and at last, when the night was very cold, and Lord knows how late, they brought me all limp to my tent. And there I sat on my bed and took off my half-burned boot, and began to put some ointment and lint on the awful mess they had made of my foot; and, when they saw me interested in this, they left me at last alone. And when I had my foot sufficiently bandaged I undressed and went to bed and got some sleep, but a sleep full of phrases that haven't quite got meanings, and thousands of ideas in a hurry but getting nowhere, and wakeful weary dreams: it was not the sleep that I wanted.”

Jorkens gave one long sigh and was mournfully silent.

“Well,” said Terbut, “I think you were undeservedly lucky to have such men at a crisis. I never heard of such devotion. You wouldn’t be here now, but for them.”

“Here,” said Jorkens with a world of scorn, and looking out at the fog. “With the pound at twelve shillings, and taxes what they are!”

“It isn’t twelve shillings,” said Terbut. “It’s over fourteen.”

“And what does that matter to me,” retorted Jorkens bitterly, “when I haven’t got any pounds, and not a dividend paying?”

I ordered two whiskeys and sodas from the waiter then.

“I see you’ve ordered one for me,” said Jorkens. “Damn my doctor. I’ll have it.”

“No, Jorkens,” I said, “they are both for you.”

And the old light came back into his eye.

Well, that’s the end of the story. But there’s a certain corroboration, or lack of it, according to how you like to look at it, that I ought to add. Terbut turned to Jorkens and said:

“A bite like that, and such drastic remedies, must have left an awful scar on your foot.”

“Yes,” said Jorkens. “It did.”

“Might we have a look at it?” said Terbut.

“If you like to take my boot off,” said Jorkens.

And it certainly was my impression that he stretched out his left foot towards Terbut.

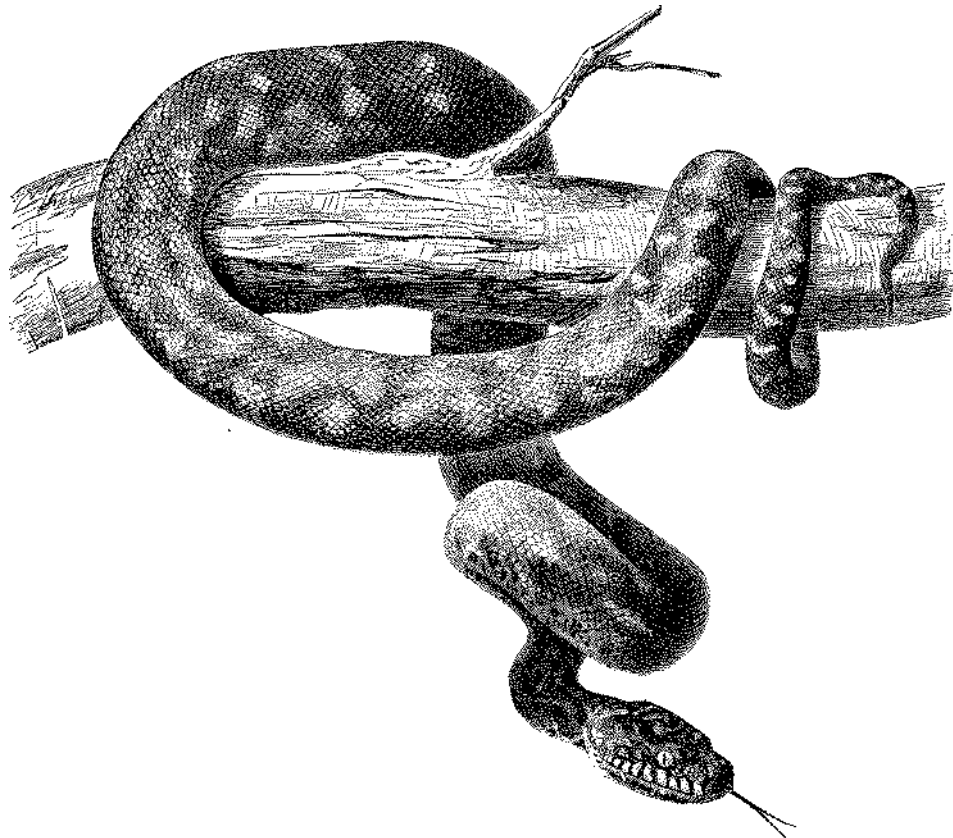
At any rate Terbut took the boot off, and then the sock, while Jorkens sat in his chair quietly drinking one of my whiskeys.

Terbut looked all over the foot, and so did we all, and certainly there was neither scar nor scratch.

We were silent till Terbut spoke. I, for one, could make nothing of it. And then Terbut said: "Not a sign of one."

"That's because you're looking at the wrong foot," said Jorkens, glancing up from his whiskey.

You wouldn't think that would have ended it, but it did. Terbut looked thoroughly fooled. And, strange as it may appear, not one of us asked to look at the other foot. Then Jorkens, rapping down the empty glass on the table, walked out of the club with an air.



The Reptile

Augustus Muir

“I’ve got a headache,” said James MacAndrew.

“Better lie down,” said Dr. Hardman.

“Aye, sir, I suppose so,” assented MacAndrew, moodily. “You see,” explained Dr. Hardman, “we’re going over the Rauch Museum this afternoon. A museum’s the most tiring place in the world, if you aren’t fit. Simply make your head worse. With a bad headache nothing can be either pleasant or instructive. Better lie down, MacAndrew.”

“I think that, sir,” muttered James MacAndrew, “I’ll just go.” He made his way slowly upstairs to his bedroom while Dr. Hardman, Lecturer on German Language and Literature at a Scottish university, hurried off across the lounge of the Berlin hotel to collect the other members of his party. To take a group of students from his Honours class for a week in Berlin was Dr. Hardman’s principal joy in the Christmas vacation. For nearly twelve hours a day he expatiated to them—all of them very Scottish and very shy. Dr. Hardman, that little, genial, chubby man, was an enthusiast, he packed the days and evenings with pilgrimages and talk, till you would have thought there was nothing more in Berlin to see or to know. He was vaguely irritated with MacAndrew for having a headache.

But MacAndrew, in the secret interstices of his soul, regarded his headache in the light of something Heavensent. His eyes were sick of the sight of art galleries; he had almost acquired a crick in the neck from gazing up at pompous statues; and he was weary of those arid journeys to gaze upon a commonplace street, notable only by the fact that it was garnished with the name of some author or soldier who had a column and a half of small type in German dictionaries of biography. With luck, the afternoon in his bed would see the headache gone; and, in any case, the respite would be pleasant. Wincing a little as he stooped, MacAndrew removed his boots, pulled up the tawdry pink quilt, and in ten minutes he was asleep.

MacAndrew was awakened by a firm touch on the shoulder. He sat up in bed. Two men were in the room. Then MacAndrew remembered that he had

lain down with a headache, which was now nearly gone. But what in the name of creation, he wondered, were two strangers doing in the bedroom?

“We want you,” said one of the men.

He was a German: MacAndrew guessed by his appearance rather than his accent. The man was squat, with a broad head, hair cut short and standing upright, and thick, uneven features accentuated by a rough and pitted skin. He was smiling down at MacAndrew, but MacAndrew did not like the smile. The other man, at whom MacAndrew cast a quick glance, was a different type: thin and hollow-cheeked, with a nervous mouth behind a tiny, trim, fair moustache and beard, and below the corners of his mouth there were two smooth patches of skin, the size of shillings, on which beard did not grow. He seemed anxious to keep in the background, but his luminous brown eyes did not waver from MacAndrew, sitting up, rather tousled, on the bed.

“What is it ye want?” said MacAndrew as gruffly as politeness would allow: there might be some good excuse for the intrusion. Now that he came to think of it, he had a notion that he had seen the two men before. But where, he could not remember.

“I have made a mistake,” said the squat man. “It is not we who want you. There is a friend who has sent us. We will take you to him—we have a motor-car waiting downstairs.”

“Who is he?” demanded MacAndrew, puzzled. “There’s nobody hurt, eh? It’s not Dr. Hardman?”

The squat man shook his head. “There is no one hurt. It is a friend you do not know, but will you please come quickly—it is urgent!”

MacAndrew pondered for a moment.

“It seems a daft-like affair,” he said cautiously. “Somebody wants to see me, ye say? Well, what’s his name?”

The man with the fair beard approached the bedside eagerly. “It will be to your advantage,” he exclaimed. “But you must come now—at once—or it may be too late. We have instructions to make haste.”

“H’m,” muttered MacAndrew doubtfully. “Is it far?” “In the motor-car—no,” declared the squat man. “We will go quick—you will be back very soon. That is so?” He turned to his companion for confirmation.

“Soon, certainly—you will be back before an hour,” he continued hastily. “It is to your own advantage that we have come. Our friend is waiting. The interview will be short, and you will not be occupied many minutes. And listen! You will be well paid—you will be rewarded highly—for such a small favour.”

“Oh, a favour, is it?” said MacAndrew. “Well, I want to know more about this favour. What d’ye want with me—I mean, what does this friend of yours want?”

The squat man was about to speak, but his companion waved him back, and again approached the bed. MacAndrew flung aside the quilt, and put his stockinged feet to the floor.

“There is little time to spare, but I will explain!”

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It was then that MacAndrew remembered where he had seen the men before; a gesture, a shrug, a glance, an attitude—something suddenly recalled them vividly to his mind. They had been sipping a drink downstairs in the shabby hotel vestibule before lunch. He remembered, too, how they had been watching the passers-by with a certain curiosity, and how he had casually put them down as visitors interested, like himself, in the passing pageant of Berlin life. Why hadn’t they tackled him before, if it was so urgent; or had they only noticed him after lunch as he turned to go upstairs to his room? In any case, they were probably mistaking him for somebody else. He was about to put a question on that point when the fair man proceeded:

“It is a very small favour, indeed. And, as I have said, it will not take many minutes. It may seem strange to you, but it would not be so if you knew the explanation. Our friend wishes a photograph of you. That is all.”

MacAndrew glared incredulously, “A photo? A photo of me? What does he want with a photo of me?”

“I am sorry,” said the squat man. “I cannot answer your question.”

“And do ye think I’ll come a footstep till ye do?” returned MacAndrew tartly.

“But surely, if it is a matter—”

“Ye’re wasting your breath, both of ye,” said MacAndrew roughly. “My own impression is that you’re mixing me up with somebody else. My name’s MacAndrew. James MacAndrew.”

“Your name is of no consequence,” said the squat man, with a little bow. “It is your appearance that matters. We are fortunate to have found you. As a matter of fact, you have an amazing resemblance to somebody—so strong that in a photograph it would appear to be the same person.”

“Oh!” said MacAndrew slowly. “Then I would like to know what this friend of yours is going to do with the photograph! Aye, and I want to know who is the man ye say I resemble!”

“His name does not matter,” said the squat man.

“But how do I know that this isn’t some plan to do him harm? Eh?” MacAndrew looked in suspicion from one to the other.

“No one can harm him,” the fair man said quietly. “He is dead.”

“Dead?” MacAndrew thought for a moment. “Then why all the fuss about—?”

“It is a matter of vital importance for our friend,” said the squat man, with warmth. “He must have a photograph of the dead man to-day. To-day, do you hear? I cannot explain the purpose, but you must believe me—it is of vital importance. And he is willing to pay you for the favour. Look, here is a hundred marks.” As he spoke he drew a note from his pocket and held it out. “We promise that you will receive another hundred marks from our friend immediately the photograph is taken. And we promise that you will be back here within an hour. Can any offer be fairer?”

The two men eagerly scanned MacAndrew’s face. “You’re a couple of queer fish,” was his first thought. And this photo business was queerer still. The story might be true, or it might not. What earthly purpose could there be in having a photograph of him or, rather, of the dead man he so closely resembled? To say the least, it was unusual, this extraordinary offer: it was something quite out of

the common rut of MacAndrew's experiences. Of course he wouldn't go; but their amazing request would be something to tell Dr. Hardman at dinner—how prolific would be the little professor's gesticulations! And now, to get rid of the men without further fuss: that was the problem before him. The squat man was shoving the hundred-mark note in his direction; the other was tugging the point of his yellow beard nervously. A hundred marks—nearly five pounds. Ten pounds altogether for one hour: not bad going for a fellow so persistently near the rocks as he was. Of course it might be lies, all of it; there might be dirty work; there might be a hard knock or two; well, he would look after himself. Besides, this was broad daylight—a quarter to three on a sunny, winter afternoon. He got to his feet.

"I'll come," said MacAndrew, suddenly holding out his hand.

"Good! Good!" cried the fair man, excitedly "I thank you—"

"If you don't mind," said MacAndrew, stolidly, "I'll have the other hundred marks now, before we start. Your friend might forget about it afterwards in his hurry."

The two men glanced at each other. The fair man nodded, and the other drew a second banknote from his pocket. With care, he laid both notes on MacAndrew's outstretched hand.

"Ah, you English! You English!" he remarked, with a dry laugh.

"I'm no English," declared MacAndrew, with pride. "I'm Scottish."

"Ah!" They nodded and smiled wryly.

"And now," said MacAndrew, "I'll see ye both downstairs in a couple of minutes." He held open his bedroom door.

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When MacAndrew reached the vestibule the two men were not in sight. He was about to sit down in one of the spindly wickerwork arm-chairs and wait, but it occurred to him that he might see them if he strolled out to the front of the hotel. At the door he caught sight of the squat man in the street. With a quick gesture to him, the man hurried off. Thirty yards away, over the heads of

the people on the pavement, MacAndrew could see a closed car standing by the kerb.

The squat man held the door open. His companion was already inside, sitting back in the corner. The door slammed; the squat man leapt beside the driver; the car moved off. MacAndrew smiled grimly.

It was a novel sensation, this. To sit here in a motor-car beside a man whom he suspected of having uttered a bundle of lies, in a city with which he was not familiar, and to ride calmly away without the least idea of what he was going to do: that intrigued MacAndrew. It would indeed make a rich tale for Dr. Hardman at dinner—aye, richer than he had intended, for at first he had not meant to come. On second thoughts, he did not altogether disbelieve the photograph story; but what was behind it? If it looked like dirty work, if it came to blows—which was possible, though unlikely—well, he would crumple up these two sprats with one big, bony hand. And if it was his money they were after—if they were mean thieves—he had tricked them nicely. For while they awaited him downstairs, he had cleared his pockets and, with proper caution, locked away everything, including the banknotes. He smiled as he recalled his foresight. But he strongly suspected that their game was something quite different.

They had told him the truth about the car, at any rate; it was swiftly threading through the crowded streets like a mouse through a stubble-field. He had no idea of their direction; but he observed that they were coming first to the suburbs, and then into country roads. It seemed a queer place to find a photographer, but MacAndrew made no comment. The car, after many turns, went down a lane and, at a large wooden gate, drew up.

MacAndrew had an impression of a dismal house, with tangled paths. They hurried in. It seemed to be a side door they entered, for the passage inside was dark and had several bends; and then MacAndrew found himself ushered into a small room. The room was well furnished, but was thick with dust. The man with the fair beard had not accompanied them.

“Look here,” said MacAndrew suddenly, “where is this you’ve taken me to?”

The squat man’s eyes flickered to him quickly, but the expression on his heavy face did not alter by a line. He pushed a box of cigarettes across the table.

“You must ask no questions. That was agreed. And if it was not agreed, it is agreed now. You have accepted his money. You have been well paid for a simple favour “

MacAndrew rose. “But what if I refuse to go on with it? If I tell ye that there’s something about this business that’s not to my liking?”

“You talk nonsense,” said the squat man. “Besides, an agreement is an agreement.”

“Take back his dirty money!” shouted MacAndrew, his hand going to his inside pocket. Then he paused awkwardly, remembering that the money was at the hotel. The squat man smiled at his discomfiture.

“Ye can come back with me to my room now,” cried MacAndrew. “Ye’ll have every cent of it.”

“There is no going back,” said the squat man, slowly. “We hold you to your promise. For one hour your services are—his.”

“We’ll see about that,” muttered MacAndrew, grimly, buttoning his jacket.

The squat man glanced out of the window in the twilight, and smiled again. Following his gaze, MacAndrew could see the large wooden gate where they had entered. Beside it stood two men, each of them as big and powerful as MacAndrew himself.

So that was the game! He was a prisoner, a prisoner for one hour. Up to this point, MacAndrew’s faculties had been on the rack to try and penetrate to the truth about their motives; but now he flung all speculation to the winds and, with a quick movement, leapt past the squat man, threw open the door, and made into the passage.

The passage was dark, and bent at sharp angles, but he remembered with fair accuracy the way he had come. There had been two doors in the passage, one open, the other closed.

MacAndrew made for the first door and dashed through. Somebody passed him in the darkness. He did not anticipate any real opposition till he reached the wooden gate outside. And even then, if he took these two burly fellows

with a rush, he had little doubt he could get clear. Many a time in the Rugby field he had broken through a cordon of such fellows, leaving them splayed out behind him.... MacAndrew blundered into the second door. It had stood open as they came in; someone had closed it. To his touch it swung back. MacAndrew moved forward. He stumbled against something that felt like a table. MacAndrew stretched out his arms. When he failed to touch the wall on either side, he realized that he was no longer in the passage, but in a room. Behind him he heard the door softly shut.

MacAndrew stood still, breathing quickly. He did not doubt for a moment that this was a trap; the door clicking gently shut behind him told him plainly that he had been meant to enter here. He turned and groped back. As he expected, the door was locked.

Like a thunder-cloud MacAndrew's wrath burst forth. He reviled himself for a fool; for only a fool—and a young fool at that—would have run his head so blindly into such a business. If he had been plausibly and amiably approached in the hotel lounge, he knew he would have refused to come; but his curiosity had been spurred by the blunt and urgent manner of their introduction. Because the whole affair had had the semblance of a challenge to his self-confidence—to his Scottish ability to look after himself—and because of the pure adventure and unusualness of it and the good money in his hand, he had fallen. He had fallen, and here he was, a prisoner, serving their obscure purpose in some obscurer way. MacAndrew drew back and threw his twelve and a-half stone of brawn against the door. Gritting his teeth in an access of fury, he hurled his weight again and again at the panels. The door did not budge.

He felt in his pocket for a match, but as he did so he closed his eyes and almost staggered. The room had suddenly been filled with a blinding light. It was like the flash of a photographer's flare. So it was a photo they wanted, these swine! As he opened his dazzled eyes he saw the room around him. And he realized that he was wrong about the photograph; their story was lies, after all. They had merely switched on the electric light; but it had happened so unexpectedly that it had given for a moment the fictitious effect of one vivid flash. Slowly he grew accustomed to the light.

And MacAndrew's eyes went straight to a couch in the corner.

Motionless on the couch there lay, under a long white sheet, the lineaments of a human form.

The stillness of death was on that figure. In his throat MacAndrew stifled a gasp.

What devilry was this he was involved in? Why had he been brought here? MacAndrew looked quickly around him. A carpet, a chair, a table, and that couch; on the table a man's hat, gloves, stick; heavy shutters padlocked across the window; a curtain masking a second door; that was all the room possessed—that, and the rigid form below the sheet. Like the other, the door behind the curtain was locked; they had forgotten nothing.

Did they mean him to look? Well, he wouldn't. He sat down at the table and waited. A chilling suspicion rose in his mind that it was someone he knew who was below that sheet. That would be why they had meant him to look. Well, he wouldn't; he wouldn't look. If they were watching him from some hidden cranny, they would be disappointed. MacAndrew took out his case and lit a cigarette. It meant a more dreadful effort of will than he had foreseen to keep the lighted match from trembling a little, but he succeeded. At any rate, they would suffer the chagrin of observing his care-free manner. MacAndrew could not explain why he felt he was being watched; but as the moments passed, the impression strengthened.

The moments passed, and to refrain from looking grew more desperately difficult. What if it were someone he knew? Perhaps they would keep him here, just like this, in this locked and shuttered room, till he had whipped up his courage to cross to the couch. But it needed even more courage to sit where he was and quietly smoke. With his determination to be calm, to be casual, the cigarette dropped from his fingers on the bare boards of the table. He was in the act of picking it up when his eye was again attracted by the figure below the sheet. The figure had moved. It was as if the body had drawn in one long, slow, uneasy breath. MacAndrew's cigarette lay unheeded, to burn a brown weal on the table and send in the air its thin waving spear of smoke. With quick strides he was across the room. He threw back the white sheet.

The figure he looked down upon was that of a young woman. The eyes were closed; the lips were parted; her body and limbs were pinioned with tough cord. As he watched, her lips quivered, and a long breath was drawn slowly in, followed by short gasps, as if she were awakening from sleep. Then he saw her eyelids flicker; the whites of her eyes appeared; and he could hear a soft, sickly moan. To MacAndrew the thing was patent. She had undoubtedly been drugged, and they had bound her and carried her here. She was now looking up at him in a dazed way, as if she were not quite certain he was there,

and her eyes drooped shut again.

MacAndrew stepped back. It was all incomprehensible. That the figure below the sheet was a girl, and alive, though in a state of stupor, made the tangle of events more puzzling. He could see no purpose, no meaning; nothing to save the perverted designs of pure brutality. The first thing to do was obviously to cut this girl loose; time enough to consider their escape when she had come to her senses. His right hand went into his trousers pocket for his penknife. Get her circulation back, let her breathe more freely, and she could soon recover. His hand, in his pocket, was disentangling the penknife from his bunch of keys, when a rustle across the room made him swing round. Behind the curtain, where a minute or two ago had been a locked door, there was a movement. He heard the sound of the door closing softly. MacAndrew's eyes widened; he found it difficult to credit his senses. Crawling from behind the curtain was a large snake.

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The snake looked about five feet long, but might, perhaps, have been less. MacAndrew, in his first high flush of horror, could not judge. In the middle, it was, perhaps as thick as his wrist. The eyes were like two black pin-pricks of light; the skin was of a mottled pattern, and on anything but the lithe body of a snake would have been beautiful. It began to move slowly across the carpet; its head, three inches above the floor, was swaying vaguely.

MacAndrew took some time to recover from the paralyzing grip of repulsion and surprise. He felt as though the blood pulsing through his veins had flowed in turn through fire and ice; and the raw physical sensations of fear, before it has been tempered by reason, left him momentarily weak. He found himself unconsciously slashing at the girl's bonds with his penknife, but with his mind he was watching the reptile.

MacAndrew stooped quickly and lifted the girl. Her head fell limply back. The snake made its way slowly across the room, passing underneath the table, till it reached the wall. Then it turned towards the couch and paused, its head still swaying from side to side, as if to music. But MacAndrew could hear no music. He could see its insignificant eyes, bright with evil, fixed on him, as he stood beside the couch with the body of the girl drooping and plastic in his arms. It came forward again. It was drawing nearer.

With a sudden movement, MacAndrew made out of the corner where the couch stood. He reached the table, quickly laid the girl upon it, then, exerting all his strength, pushed it into the opposite corner of the room. It was the only temporary place of safety he could devise. MacAndrew picked up the walking-stick from the table and, grasping it firmly, turned to face the reptile.

It was still moving inch by inch towards the couch, now and then raising its head higher, and lowering it to continue the rhythmic sway. It came round in a slow circle, as if to explore the confines of the chamber. It seemed to be disregarding their presence. But when it faced them again, MacAndrew saw the black glitter of its eye. In the horror of these moments as he faced it, the truth emerged mistily in his thick brain. The girl and himself were obviously in the hands of some lunatic: a lunatic whose debased satisfactions were knit up with the idea of death: death, and the more terrible the better. That hollow-eyed creature with the fair beard, probably he had wealth; and the other was his toady, fleecing him while he pandered to him. Death: and better still, the death of a foreigner, and of a foreign girl: let the foreigner fight for both their lives, and let them both perish in horror and in agony.

Behind him, on the table, the girl's breath was coming in quick stresses, interpolated by gentle choking sighs. He glanced round. Her eyelashes were parted, but she saw nothing. She had turned over her head on her flaccid arm. MacAndrew put his hand behind him, and pushed her as far as he could from the edge of the table. The stick, in the fingers of his other hand, quivered.

The snake was near him, now; it was time to act. MacAndrew took a step forward and hit out with all his might. He felt a sudden surge of dread as he realized that he had misjudged the distance by an inch. He staggered and almost fell before he recovered his balance from the abortive blow. The snake came towards him; it seemed to be almost at his feet; and with a gasp MacAndrew swung the stick back, putting his full force into the return stroke. He was just in time. The end of the stick got home behind the reptile's head, and it went writhing across the floor. MacAndrew watched it slide below the couch. Then it crawled back into the open, making the same wide circle as before, but moving more quickly, raising and lowering its head, and all the time coming nearer to him.

This time MacAndrew went out to meet it. He swung his stick, measuring the distance carefully with his eye. He realized that wild lunges were useless. It was vital that he reach the mark with every blow. If he were successful in

striking it in the same place behind the head, there was a chance of dazing it. He gave a gasp of satisfaction as the second blow went home. The reptile coiled back in a mass, and the head shot out viciously. MacAndrew hit again; and again he felt the stick jar in his hand as the snake spun over on the carpet. But in a flash it had straightened out, and came round once more in a curve, its head making quick, angry jerks from side to side, its eyes glittering.

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In moments of acute emotion, the human brain plays strange tricks; a second seems an hour, and the sizes of things are queerly altered. MacAndrew thought of how birds are lured to sudden doom, impotent in the green fire of an adder's eye. The snake in front of him took on strangely larger proportions, and the weapon in his hand seemed but a wisp of straw. MacAndrew shook himself, conscious that his nerve would give way with the static stress of prolonged inaction, and went forward again, and again hit out, flinging all his power and craft into the stroke. The reptile curled over on the carpet, its tail lashing upwards. Then, with a swift lunge, MacAndrew seized up the chair that lay toppled against the wall.

His chance came the next moment. Exerting every muscle, he crashed down the chair on the ugly head, leaping back to avoid the whipping tail, jumping in to strike at every opportunity. A sense of triumph gave power to his blows. Then he flung the chair down. The tail whirled up: the mottled body curled and writhed round the stout wooden legs; but its head was pinioned by the chair-back, and all his weight was pressing on it. The next moment its head was below his heel, and with joy he heard the crunch.

Dazed, he watched the coils relax; they slipped to the floor with a soft thud. MacAndrew kicked aside the chair. The snake did not move. Still dazed, and by force of habit, MacAndrew suddenly stamped on his cigarette, which smouldered on the carpet. He was vaguely surprised that it was still burning. It seemed an eternity since he had put it into his mouth with bravado, and lit it with that defiant flourish. He leant against the mantelpiece, feeling faint. Putting his hand to his face, he found it wet, and he realized that his body was quivering, and damp with cold sweat.

MacAndrew was dimly conscious of a door opening. In front of him he saw the squat man and the man with the fair beard. He thought the fair man's face was puckering in a horrible smile, but he was not certain. At the moment he

was not certain of anything, except that the snake was dead, and he had killed it.

The fair man was talking to him, but he did not listen.

“I’ve beat ye, ye swine,” said MacAndrew slowly, his strength returning. “I’ve beat ye. And now I’m going to kill ye, as I’ve killed that—”

All his Celtic blood on fire, MacAndrew leapt on the man. Before he realized what he was doing, his fingers had dug into a soft throat, and the two men went to the floor. MacAndrew’s eyes were alight, and he cried out with inarticulate wrath, as his fingers bored their way into the puny throat within his hands.

There was a scuffle in the rear. MacAndrew felt a blinding blow on the top of his head, and a chair toppled over him. Then his senses went spinning into a vast white haze....

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When MacAndrew opened his eyes, he saw people and shops flashing past, and he realized that he was in a motor-car. The squat man sat beside him.

“Feeling better?” said the squat man. “I must apologize. Perhaps I struck harder than I need have done, but I really thought you had finished him. You should keep your temper better under control, young man. I must remind you that you agreed to our proposals of your own free will. And we kept to our bargain in every particular. In every particular.”

“Liar,” said MacAndrew, wearily; his head felt as if it were bursting, and he was in no fettle to argue.

“Not at all,” said the squat man politely. “We said we wanted a photograph of you, and we have got it. You have heard of Hugo Richter, who died a month ago? Perhaps not. All the same, he was a great actor. This afternoon you have taken his place. At the time of his death, one scene in his last motion picture remained unphotographed. For weeks we have been searching for a man who resembled him exactly; it is lucky that you came along. In that room three film cameras have captured every expression of your face, every motion in your mind. We are realists, we Germans. Your horror was perfect—”

“Swine! Swine!” said MacAndrew through his teeth. “The police—”

“Police? They would not listen. There are two witnesses to prove our bargain, and many more to prove that no harm could have come to you.” The squat man laughed harshly. “It would have spoilt everything, would it not, if we had told you beforehand that it took one of the cleverest men in Berlin three weeks to make that marvellous piece of mechanism which you thought was a serpent? Go to the police, young man—go! It will but advertise the last great Richter film in Central Europe. And now, good-bye. We thank you for your services. Your hotel is round the corner.”

MacAndrew found himself bundled out on the pavement, his head still swimming confusedly. He was sitting in the hotel lounge when Dr. Hardman came briskly in with his group of students.

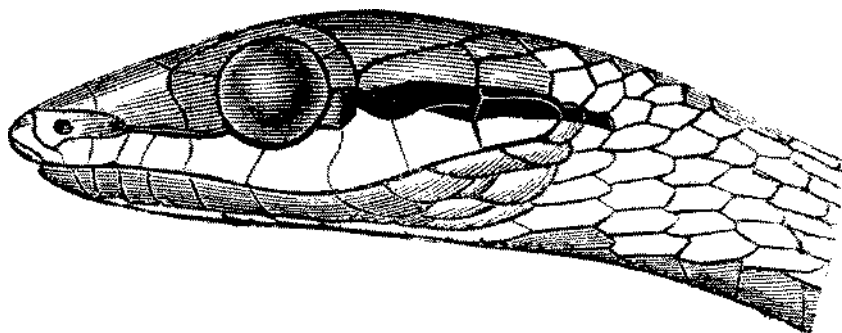
“Ah, MacAndrew!” said the little lecturer cheerfully. “You have missed a treat! How are you feeling now, MacAndrew?”

“Got an awful headache, sir,” muttered MacAndrew, stifling a groan.

“Headache? Better lie down, MacAndrew. Better go upstairs and lie down!”

MacAndrew’s reply to his professor is still spoken of with awe in a certain Scottish University Union.

“Lie down again?” he cried. “Lie down again in this confounded hotel? Lie down be damned!” And over the small round table, he glowered at the professor



Truth Is Stranger

Percival Christopher Wren

The infinitely-bored garrison of a smart desert outpost—apparently forgotten of God and man—was engaged in what Hank Vanbrugh called ‘a lie-swapping feste’.

Inasmuch as each man was relating what he considered the most remarkable experience of his life, there may have been a certain amount of truth in Hank’s gibe; and undoubtedly some of the story-tellers were story-tellers in the worse sense of the world—Barons Munchausen, or at the best, collateral descendants.

(And yet Tant de Soif’s story of witnessing Captain Battreau’s finding of his old gun in Dahomey, albeit one of the most incredible of all, proved to be plain, unvarnished, historical fact.)

Also, paradoxically, the longer one lives and the more one sees, the more credulous one becomes: in other words, the slower one is to say,

‘That is impossible.’

When my own turn came to contribute, I also told the simple truth, partly because I am aware that Truth is stranger than Fiction, and partly because I was interested to see whether my truth would be scouted and jeered at, as the biggest lie of all.

It is by no means an easy matter to decide, with promptness and certitude, which has been the strangest adventure of one’s life.

If, casting prudence to the winds, one goeth forth and seeketh sorrow, one’s strangest experience is apt to be concerned with the little puddle of muddy water that is not there at the end of a long desert ride, and a day of dreadful thirst; or with those tiny insects known to their victims as the spirillum tick, the tsetse fly, the anopheles mosquito, the chigoe (or ‘jigger’), and the sandfly.

One’s adventures, indeed, are apt to be monotonous, the level of their monotony depending upon one’s way of life.

There is to the ivory poacher, in the routine pursuit of his profession and his elephants, the oft-repeated humdrum adventure of the earth-shaking charge of the wounded beast; to the sailor the over-familiar sea-shaking charge of the terrible typhoon; to the city clerk the far deadlier onslaught of the hundred-headed hooting hydra of the traffic.

In deciding which of my experiences has been the strangest I chose extensive rather than intensive strangeness—that which lasted longer, rather than that which was strangest for a brief period.

The following curious adventure lasted for a whole day.

It happened some years ago that, in going about my lawful occasions in India, I found myself the temporary occupant of a somewhat lonely bungalow, not very far from a small cantonment in a rather wild and hilly part of a Native State.

It was by no means a bad spot.

Grouse, partridge, hare, and, in due season, quail, duck, and snipe, afforded a certain amount of rough shooting.

There were panther and occasional rumours of tiger and, near the cantonment, earthen tennis courts and a golf course, throughout the length and breadth of which there was not a solitary blade of grass.

The tees were plinths of earth-topped stone; the fairway bare, sandy, gravelly earth; the bunkers were rocky nullahs; and the 'greens' circular tracts of clay and cow-dung which the sun had baked as hard as stone, and in which the rains had channelled little riverbeds that meandered down to the hole—a sunken jam-pot.

Of one of these, more anon.

My domestic staff at the bungalow included, among others, my butler—a Surti (a Hindoo from Surat), a good and faithful servant to whom I sometimes said 'Well done!' and a Pathan syce—a huge, brawny, powerful man, who was something of an enigma.

I frequently wondered what this free-born, independent mountaineer (who 'trod the ling like a buck in spring and looked like a lance in rest') was doing

among my servants. I came to the conclusion that he was either badly wanted on the Frontier, or else was in India on quite other business than mine.

Anyhow, he was a fine horseman and horse-master, and he was a man.

One peaceful Sabbath morn, I was seated in a long chair on my verandah, enjoying my cheroot, reading a three-weeks-old newspaper from Home, and digesting my eleven o'clock tiffin of curried chicken.

I had risen at five, had chota-hazri (tea, toast, and fruit), ridden some twenty miles or so, had a bath, and given reasonable satisfaction to an excellent appetite.

I was comfortable, somnolent, at peace with all the world, and desired nothing less than to be disturbed.

Anon I flung away the end of my cheroot, let the paper fall, and was just dropping off into the delightful nap that I had justly earned, when a voice said,

'Huzoor! Huzoor!' and brought me back from the very edge of slumber and of peace.

I cannot honestly say that I was pleased, or that the eye I opened regarded the countenance of the speaker with favour. In fact, lovely and beautiful as is my nature, I was annoyed.

'G'way,' I murmured, closing the eye of disfavour.

'Huzoor! Huzoor!' insisted the voice.

'G'w'out,' I breathed, as the barque of consciousness slipped its moorings from the bank of reality, and floated down the river of oblivion.

'Huzoor! Huzoor!' more loudly insisted the voice, and I shot up from my chair, frankly angry.

This was presumption—impudence—insolence. The fellow had no right to be there at all, much less to dare to wake me up after he had intruded.

'What do you want?' I said quietly, and with the courtesy due to myself and the anger that I felt.

‘I am a snake-charmer,’ said the man who stood before me, at the bottom of the three or four steps that led up to the low, wide verandah of the bungalow.

He was a tall, lean Hindoo, wearing a ragged and dirty white coat, white dhoti (voluminous loin-cloth), large roughly-wound turban, and clumsy curly-toed slippers.

He carried a long, heavy staff in his right hand, and his left steadied a bamboo rod which, resting on his shoulder, supported at either end a large closely woven basket.

I stared coldly, and without love or welcome, at the man’s eyes, which gave back as good a stare as my own—a most unusual thing. There was nothing shifty, humble, or servile about this mendicant.

Far from servile, his attitude and conduct were barely civil.

‘I am a snake-charmer, Huzoor,’ he repeated.

‘Well, go and charm them,’ I requested, ‘and don’t bother me. I don’t want to see your show. Go away.’

‘I do not wish to give a show, Huzoor,’ replied the man, without budging. ‘I will charm away all the snakes from your bungalow and compound.’

‘Charm yourself away,’ I said. ‘And at once.’

And I settled back in my chair, closed my eyes, and strove to let the sun of peaceful contentment dissipate the red mist of anger.

‘Huzoor! Huzoor!’ came the insistent voice, a few moments after I had closed my eyes.

I opened them slowly.

‘I really think you’d better go,’ I said gently, and added slowly, firmly, and distinctly, ‘I—do—not—want—to—see— any—snake-charming.’

The man did not move.

I closed my eyes again.

Was it possible that I closed them in relief from the steady hypnotic stare of the snake-charmer? Absurd!

But he certainly had most remarkable eyes—brilliant, compelling, mesmeric.

And the man undoubtedly had that indescribable quality of manner that comes from a sense of power—something authoritative, assured, and self-possessed. This could not arise from physical, external, and concrete authority of any kind, but must come from within, and from a sense of some personal power—perhaps some example of that knowledge which is power.

‘Huzoor! Huzoor!’ said the voice again.

‘Will you go—while the going’s good?’ I said. ‘For the last time, I do not want to see any snake-charming.’

‘The Presence need not see it,’ was the immediate reply. ‘Let the Presence give me five rupees and I will remove the snakes that he may live in peace.’

I am a patient man.

‘Give you five rupees to charm away all the snakes that are not in my compound and garden and under my bungalow?’ I said.

‘I haven’t seen a snake since I’ve been here, and I haven’t seen a dozen since I’ve been in India.’

The man smiled indulgently.

‘The Presence will see more now, I think, unless he has them removed.’

‘I’ll risk it,’ I said.

‘The Presence is in great danger,’ was the reply.

‘Then I am not the only one,’ I answered. “Will you go?”

‘Better five rupees than terror—fear—trembling—horror— death,’ was the

reply. 'The Huzoor is in great danger, and I alone can save him. Let him beware of the silent poisoned death.'

And not only was there a menacing note in the voice, but a note of superiority!

Was this ragged wanderer actually warning and threatening me—speaking from a higher plane of psychic knowledge and occult power?

Was he actually daring to extort money by threats—to blackmail me by playing upon my supposed fear?

I admire courage—and this sublime impudence amounted to it.

'Look here,' I said, 'you're playing a very foolish and dangerous game, and you've been luckier with me than you would have been with some people. Now, for your own sake, and for the last time, go away.'

He did not move an inch.

Leaning his great staff against his shoulder, he extended his right hand towards my face, and then, with a writhing motion, made passes, to and fro, in the air.

'The poisoned death,' he said. 'The gliding death. Secret, silent, hidden—beneath the chair, beneath the bed, in the darkened room, in the rafters above, in the shadowy corners below.'

Very impressive, no doubt. Very clever. Very hypnotic and all that. And perhaps I did go a little cold, and feel a little uncomfortable.

I had always been interested in the Indian juggler's tricks, 'occultism' and miracle-mongering, because I believed hypnotism to be the explanation of his performance of the impossible; and I had decided mass-hypnotism to be his secret.

Otherwise, how could a number of people see a man throw a rope up into the air, the rope become as rigid as a rod, a small boy climb up it and then vanish into thin air?

Anyhow, this gentleman certainly was not going to hypnotize me, nor conjure five rupees out of my pocket.

Had he come in different style and at a suitable time, I might have given him a chance to show what he could do in the hypnotic line, and have backed my will-power against his hypnotic power, with the small sum of five rupees in the balance.

But impudence and blackmail were quite another story.

I rose to my feet, yawned and stretched, descended the three or four steps to where he stood.

The snake-charmer did not move as I advanced upon him.

‘Go,’ I said, and pointed down the drive.

‘Does not the Huzoor value his reason and his life at five rupees even?... Or perhaps they are worth only four? Perhaps the Huzoor’s is not a valuable life?...’

And there was actual mockery in the man’s voice.

Now I have never struck nor hustled a native, for it is a cowardly thing to do, as well as being undignified and unworthy. On those very rare occasions when I hear or read of a European striking a native, I feel pretty certain that the latter is neither very big nor strong, and that I should like to ask the bully if he would care to strike Roshan Khan, my Pathan syce.

But I admit I was sorely tempted. The man was tall and strong and carried an iron-shod lathi, which was both a weapon and a staff. He had intruded where he had no right to be; he had refused to go when asked; he had been insolent and threatening, both in words and in manner, and moreover, he had attempted blackmail.

I put my hands in my pockets to keep them obedient.

‘Will you go—or will you be thrown out?’ I asked.

‘Three rupees—for the Huzoor’s life. Only three rupees. Very cheap,’ was the answer.

But behind the impudent jeer there was a threat, and there was nothing of jest, flippancy or mere impudence in the burning eyes that held mine.

Going back to the verandah, I called 'Boy' at the top of my voice. (In India one's servant is always one's 'boy' though he be a white-haired grandfather.)

My butler came hurrying from one of the rooms that opened on to the verandah.

'Send this man out of the compound, and see that he doesn't come back,' I said, as I returned to my chair.

'Dao, tum!' said Sukharam Raoji, bustling forward importantly and speaking as a beadle to a small boy. 'Go away! Get out of it.'

And he went to take the man by the arm, to conduct him from the Presence.

But he did not take the snake-charmer by the arm, or conduct him anywhere.

On the contrary, the intruder looked at him and he wilted; hissed a sharp word and he fell back; made a motion or sign with his hand and he swiftly retreated up the steps of the verandah and stood cowering behind my chair.

This was interesting, but really beyond a joke.

'You are certainly looking for trouble, my friend,' said I to the snake-charmer, 'and you're going to find it. If you get hurt, you will have only yourself to thank.'

And turning to the trembling Sukharam, I said,

'Call Roshan Khan.'

Nothing loth, the butler hurried off, and did not return.

Not so the snake-charmer.

'Two rupees,' he said, smiling impudently. 'Two rupees for the Huzoor's life! Surely it's worth that much! Two rupees to save the Huzoor from being frightened.'

I lit another cheroot as Roshan Khan strolled round the corner of the bungalow, tall, erect, swaggering, a curled and oiled love-lock in front of his ear, his pugaree set at a truculent angle, its fringed and embroidered end depending between his mighty shoulders.

‘Sahib?’ he said, approaching and saluting in military fashion. He never salaamed, as an Indian does.

‘Put this man out,’ I said. ‘And help him a little way on his journey!’

The big Pathan smiled, with a flash of white teeth beneath his clipped moustache, and joyously advanced upon the sturdy rogue.

What I expected to see was that Roshan Khan, seizing him by the scruff of the neck, would run him down the drive and propel him into the road, with a little help from a large and useful hoof.

But this was not what happened.

The man’s extraordinary glowing eyes fixed those of Roshan Khan. His hand shot out and made weaving passes. He uttered a harsh, peremptory ‘Stand still!’ and Roshan Khan stood still, a look of puzzled bewilderment on his face.

The fellow then repeated the word he had spat at Sukharam—a word which I did not understand.

I rose from my chair, but he turned to me and, half-menacingly, half-jeeringly, said,

‘One rupee for the Huzoor’s life! One rupee to save the Huzoor from being frightened! Only one rupee! Last offer!... No?’ he added, and backed away. ‘On the Huzoor’s head be it.’

And turning, he strode down the drive, the while I felt somewhat ashamed of the self-control of which I had, perhaps, more reason to be proud.

At the gate he turned and, having raised both hands, appeared to be calling down blessings upon me and my house.

I turned to the Pathan, a striking figure in his long, white, shirt-like garment, with its silver studs and chains, gold-embroidered red-velvet waistcoat, enormous baggy white trousers, fitting tightly at the ankle, and curly-toed shoes.

‘Why didn’t you do as I told you, Roshan Khan?’ I asked coldly.

‘Sahib?’ was the reply.

He was like a man waking from sleep.

‘Why didn’t you throw that man out as I told you?’ I asked. ‘He was a budmash.’

‘What man, Sahib?’ asked Roshan Khan.

‘The man who was here just now,’ I said sharply.

‘Where, Sahib? What man?’ asked the Pathan, staring round, and looking about as puzzled as I felt.

‘Oh, go away,’ I replied, and went back to my chair, feeling thoroughly disgruntled and annoyed, and with half a mind to call for my horse and, taking a whip, ride after my gifted visitor and give him a rupee’s worth of the fear he talked about.

As I sat pondering the extraordinary incident, and marvelling at the way the fellow had handled Roshan Khan—Roshan Khan, brave as a lion, strong as an ox, swift as a buck and wily as a fox—I became increasingly conscious of the heat.

It was about time to go inside the bungalow and close doors and shutters until such time as the sun had begun to sink.

Rising from my chair, I shouted for a servant, and unfastened a cord from the nail over which the looped end of it was slipped, thereby releasing the big uprolled ‘chick’ or curtain, made of thin parallel strips of bamboo.

This heavy green curtain of bamboo and string was some ten feet in length and breadth, and rolled up into a cylinder a foot or more in thickness.

As the ‘chick’ moved to descend, something fell from the top of it, striking me on the head and shoulders, curling itself about my neck—writhing—twisting, and I realized that it was a snake.

Instantly I snatched at it, seized it, and dashed it heavily upon the ground before it had time or opportunity to strike.

As I flung it down, I stamped hard with my right foot, and bitterly regretted that I was not wearing my riding-boots. If the reptile had time to strike, socks and tussore silk trousers above thin shoes would be no protection.

But my luck was in—my foot was firmly planted a few inches behind the snake's head, and it could only lash and writhe in furious impotence.

Putting my weight on my right foot, and slightly bending my right knee, I got a comfortable balance and slowly raised my left foot from the ground.

My task would have been easy enough had the ugly head, with its darting tongue, protruded from the inner side of my foot, but, as it was, I managed quite satisfactorily.

Bringing the left foot across the right, I held it poised for a second, and then stamped heavily. To be on the safe side, I then jumped clear, but found that the snake was in that condition in which it is best for poisonous reptiles to be.

Giving him one more stamp on the head to 'mak' siccar,' I bade the approaching hamal remove this bauble, and retired into my darkened room—and before long discovered that, for the first time, I did not like the darkened room—for there were too many shadows.

The corners were altogether too dark.

The high-pitched raftered roof disappeared into impenetrable gloom.

Yes, that was the word—gloom. The whole place had become gloomy, depressing, inimical.

And what an extraordinary coincidence about that snake!

It was coincidence, of course, but...

I lay down in my long chair to think, and immediately bounded to my feet, and I'm not sure that I didn't utter a yell as I sprang up.

My head had touched something cold, softish, springy, alive, horrible.

I struck a match and found that I was shaking—not so much from fear, I think, as from disgust, horror, anger.

There was nothing on the back of the chair where my head had rested.

I sat down again....

What was that?

A dry rustle, a sound of a slow, quiet movement—across the floor, like well, like the soft, gentle sound of a snake gliding across the palm-leaf matting.

Where was it?

Was it behind me?

I leapt up and threw the door open, letting in a flood of light and a wave of superheated air.

There was no snake in the room.

I opened the slatted shutters.... No, nothing.

It was a terribly hot day, and the room was getting like an oven.

Well, the heat was real enough, if the snakes were not, so I once more closed the door and shut it. Having done so, I was strongly tempted to open it again.

What about a lamp?

Ridiculous! What was the matter with me, that I should think of such a thing? I would retire to my bedroom for the siesta that is forced upon one in the hottest part of the day, in the hot weather.

My bedroom adjoined this central living-room. As I opened the door to enter its slightly cooler darkness, I heard behind me a soft thud—a perfectly unmistakable sound of something dropping on to the matting.

I fairly sprang round, and stared in the direction whence the sound had come.

There was no illusion about this. I had heard it as distinctly as I had ever heard anything in my life, and I knew what had caused the sound. A snake had fallen from one of the crossbeams that supported the high-pitched, thatched roof. I stepped swiftly into the bedroom and closed the door.

There was, beside my bed, an electric torch which might yet possess a ray of vitality.

It did, and with its help I found a leather-covered cane which I sometimes carried. Not too light and not too pliant, it would be an excellent weapon for dealing with any but a big snake, such as a python.

Armed with torch and stick, I opened the door, and, turning; the beam of light in the direction whence the sound had come, I saw, as I had expected, something coiled, slender, tapering.

With a couple of strides and a swift stroke, I brought down my stout cane heavily upon—the thong of my hunting crop, which had for some reason, or for no reason, fallen down from the nail over which I had hung it when I removed it from its broken handle!

With feelings too deep for words, I returned to my bedroom, changed into pyjamas, and remarking,

‘Let it rain snakes,’ threw myself down on the bed.

I must have fallen asleep almost immediately, and in that sleep I suffered one of the most ghastly nightmares conceivable—being slowly crushed by a great python, being swallowed alive, and remaining buried alive in its interior.

I awoke, bathed in perspiration, trembling with horror, and feeling very ill indeed.

I felt that a whisky-and-soda was indicated, and, breaking my hitherto Medean-Persian law of no drinks before sunset, I treated myself to a strong one.

‘And now a cold bath, I think,’ said I, refreshed and enheartened.

Going to the bathroom, a built-out, brick-walled room with a stone floor, furnished with nothing but a large bath-tub and a quart-pot for pouring water

over oneself, I threw off my pyjamas, and went to step into the bath which, as usual at this time of day, was almost full of cold, or rather tepid, water.

Where the outer wall met the floor, was a hole through which the bath-water ran away out into the garden when the bath was emptied.

As I stepped towards the bath, I noticed that the hamal or the bhisti, or some other fool, had laid a rope round the bottom of it, outside it and close up to it.

With my mind obsessed with snakes I thought to myself, 'Ah, snakes will never cross a rope.'

Now, if the fool had laid a rope in a complete circle round the bath, and a foot or two away from it, no snake would crawl over it and attack me, defenceless, in my bath.

A silly sort of idea, of course, because no snake would attack anyone in his bath.

There's only one snake in India which will take the offensive, and attack you wantonly and deliberately, and that's the hamadryad.

It is only when a snake falls on you, or you tread on it, or unintentionally touch it, or in some way give it the impression that you are going to molest it, or when it feels it is cornered, that it will attack.

Nevertheless, tens of thousands of people and domestic animals are killed by snakes, in India, every year.

I splashed about in my bath for a while, stood up and poured the more-or-less cold water over my head, stepped out of the bath, the quart-pot still in my hand, and yanked at the rope with my toe.

For the sake of coolness, presumably, the bathroom was but dimly lit by one small window, and that a very dirty one.

There was ample and sufficient light, however, for me to see the rope leap into life, galvanized by the touch of my foot.

In a second, a great cobra had whirled into a coil, reared a quarter of its length from the floor and thrown back its head to strike.

I struck first, and probably am alive today only because I still had that heavy quart-pot in my hand.

Instinctively and mechanically as the rope turned into a snake, I leapt back, raised my arm and flung the pot with all my might.

I believe it struck the snake just below the head, on the throat of its spreading 'hood,' but of this I'm not certain, because almost in the act of hurling the pot, I again leapt backward, and then dashed through the door, slamming it behind me.

In record time, I slipped a couple of Number Four cartridges into my shotgun, and returned to continue the argument.

Flinging open the bathroom door,

'Now, you devil,' said I, 'where are you?'

Echo answered, 'Where?'

There was no snake.

I think this upset me more than if there had been one. Or two, for the matter of that.

I threw the outer door open, letting in a flood of sunlight.

No, there was no sign of a snake. Nor was there any conceivable hiding-place for so much as a garden worm, let alone a great cobra.

'I'm going mad,' thought I, 'or gone mad. That damned snake-charmer has put a hoodoo on me, a curse, a spell.'

Then I realized that the heavy dipper was dented.

Of course I'd thrown it. It wasn't a hallucination. There was the pot, giving clearest evidence of the great force with which I had flung it.

Yes, but what did that prove? Only that I had thrown it.

It didn't prove that I'd thrown it at a snake or any other actual concrete living

thing. It might quite well have been hallucination. I might have thrown it at a non-existent figment of my bewitched imagination.

Of course, the snake might have escaped through the drainage-hole in the wall—but it struck me as highly improbable that the cobra should have found the hole and escaped through it in so short a time.

‘Seeing snakes!’ I groaned aloud. ‘Literally seeing snakes.’

Then healthy human anger came to my help.

‘Let me get hold of that snake-charmer,’ said I, ‘and he’ll see stars.... Non-existent figments of his imagination, but he’ll see ‘em all right....’

What about another spot of whisky?

No. Wrong treatment for the patient altogether. A pot of good strong tea would be a much better prescription.

Tea, and the sounds of life and movement, as the servants opened the doors and shutters of the bungalow, made me feel a good deal better.

I would pull myself together, ride over to the golf links, and forget this silly nonsense in a mighty endeavour to beat bogey—a curiously appropriate phrase in the circumstances, for this bogy certainly had to be beaten.

Having finished tea in the sitting-room, I returned to my bedroom with a magazine, at which I had been glancing, in my hand.

I flung the book on to the bed, half noticing in the dim light, as I did so, that the hamal had moved a round black cushion from my chair to the bed. He had not opened the shutters of this room, as the late afternoon sun was shining full upon them.

As I changed into riding kit, I sat on the edge of the bed, and when I went to the dressing-table mirror to brush my hair, I partly opened one side of a shutter that was just behind it.

This let a flood of light into the room, and as I turned from the dressing-table, the cushion on the bed also turned. It turned into a snake—or else it had been

a snake the whole time. And I had sat within two feet of it!

I wasn't afraid of the snake, but I was very terribly afraid—of fear: and I earnestly hoped it was a snake, and that I was not 'seeing things'.

A bright idea! My camera was hanging on the wall. I would find out whether that 'saw things' too.

Turning, I slipped it from its case and focused it on the snake, which promptly raised its head and posed in profile.

'Look pleasant,' I said, 'and keep still.'

It kept very still and so did I, until I heard the satisfying click.

From force of habit, I wound another film into place, and then put the camera on the chest of drawers.

I then picked up my cane and advanced upon mine enemy. As I came within striking distance he raised his head and drew it back to strike. I struck first, however—a beautiful, horizontal swipe, bringing the cane from behind my left shoulder—and the evil head dropped as the reptile writhed with broken neck.

Giving him another, I tipped him off the bed on to the floor, and set my heel upon his head—and that was that.

My chief sensation as I saw his body carried forth, limply dangling across a stick, was satisfaction that it was a snake and not the mere figment of a disordered mind; but, almost as strong, was that of wonder at the extraordinary coincidence of my encountering three snakes within a few hours of the snake-charmer's baleful prophecy!

As I rode to the golf links, followed by Roshan Khan, I wondered what I should do if I encountered that charmer of serpents.

I did not do so, perhaps fortunately for both of us.

What I did encounter, however, at the end of my ride, was a lonely golfer earnestly seeking a companion and opponent for a game.

Curiously enough, I have absolutely forgotten his name. What I have not forgotten is that which happened at the last hole.

My ball was lying in a little rocky depression on the edge of the cracked uneven clay 'green.' My opponent's ball lay, very comfortably placed in life, on a sandy patch of hard earth a few yards from the 'green.' Taking his putter, he struck it a gentle blow which would land it in the nearest winding dry water-channel that sloped gently down from the edge of the 'green' to the sunken three-pound jam-pot that was the flagless hole.

Laughing aloud as the ball meandered inevitably down the rain-made gulley, I put my hand into the jam-pot to receive it on its arrival. For it could not go astray—the putt had achieved success as soon as the ball entered the mouth of this safe-delivery route to its goal.

Gathering speed and momentum, the ball arrived, and fell into the pot and my awaiting hand.

As it did so, the dusty bottom of the pot swirled into life, a kind of big watch-spring uncurled, as it were, and became a krait—the smallest and deadliest snake in the world.

My hand had touched it, aroused it, and was holding it down. While it did so, the snake could not strike.

As I clenched my fist with the foolish idea of killing it with a crushing pressure, its head darted up between my hand and the side of the jam-jar, and, in a second, it was over the edge and darting off. The speed with which it moved was astounding, but I had my putter in my right hand and promptly used it for an unorthodox but satisfying stroke—satisfying to me, anyhow.

'By Jove! that was a near thing,' said my friend, and added, 'First snake I've seen for months.'

But it was the fourth I had seen—and killed—that day. What about the next?

I rode home feeling very thoughtful indeed, and the night I spent was, perhaps, the worst night of my life. And yet I slept the whole time. But when I awoke I decided that the nightmare I had had made that of the previous afternoon, by comparison, a deep dream of peace.

It was an astonishing dream. Not only for its appalling agony, but for its coherence and consecutiveness.

As I lay, half awake and half asleep, I heard that dry rustling sound again—the sound of a snake moving across palm-leaf matting. The sound seemed to come from under my bed, and I was seized with terror, filled with horror, frightened almost to death; my heart throbbed audibly, and I burst into a cold perspiration.

That devilish sorcerer! This was no coincidence. Five actual snakes within twenty-four hours, and the whole time a constant threat and menace and fear of snakes unseen!

And the worst feature of the whole astounding business was the fact that I was really getting frightened.... I was frightened.

Fear was overcoming me; dominating my mind....

I realized that this wouldn't do, and that I must not allow myself to become a victim of fear, which was precisely what the snake-charmer intended, no doubt.

One must maintain, at all costs, one's sense of proportion, and compel one's mind to keep rats, mice, beetles, spiders, mosquitoes, snakes and snake-charmers, in their proper place—as minor nuisances and drawbacks in an otherwise well-arranged Universe.

As these thoughts flashed through my mind, the snake moved again.

Philosophy faded to nothingness, and I quailed.

And then, happily, the fear of being afraid triumphed, and I sprang out of bed, regardless of the fact that my feet were bare and my thin pyjamas rolled up above my knees.

Yes, there he was, the beast—a cobra, sinuously gliding along by the wall, apparently looking for an outlet.

The door was ajar, and both the snake and I appeared to realize the fact simultaneously, for, as I stood erect, he quickened his leisurely glide and darted straight for the opening.

So did I, and what followed had a delightful and efficient neatness for which I take no credit.

I acted almost automatically and as though impelled by the subconscious rather than by the conscious mind.

With one bound, I reached the door, a fraction of a second later than the snake's head, and slammed it sharply.

Did ever living creature devise for itself a simpler trap? The situation was changed, and with it my whole mental attitude to snakes. They were ridiculous creatures that one trapped in doors, smacked with canes, crushed with one's heel!

Stooping down, I slightly relaxed the pressure of the door that held the reptile squirming, writhing and thrashing about, and, seizing it with my right hand, drew it slowly and gradually into the room, inch by inch, until my hand was safely and comfortably behind its head.

Holding it thus, I picked it up and endeavoured to treat it with that familiarity which breeds contempt. A feeling of contempt for the adversary is much more satisfactory than one of fear.

I also treated it with unkindness, gripping it with all my strength, and thrusting my thumb against its throat.

It became limp and quiescent, its tremendous strugglings, coilings, writhings and wriggings dwindling into mere spasms and constrictions of its seven-foot body.

From that day I never saw another snake in India. So ended the incident of the truculent snake-charmer, decidedly the most remarkable, interesting and strange incident of my life....

My hearers received the story with enthusiasm—and my statement that it was true, with contempt.