THE ABSORBENT-STONE.

A DAY WITH COBRA-HUNTERS.

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Some years ago I was marching with my battery near Panipat in the Punjab. My Commanding Officer at the time was a keen sportsman, as well as a kind and indulgent person, who frequently gave me a day off, so that I might go wandering into the jungle instead of slogging along the hard high road by the side of my section. My modus operandi, on these "jungling days," was simple. I used to ride out of camp at dawn, or thereabouts, and, taking a couple of natives and a few sandwiches with me, I would make a wide détour and rejoin the battery at its next camping-ground when night fell. The country through which we passed was often quite unknown to me; little or no information of any value could be extracted from the inhabitants, and game was in many districts chiefly remarkable for its scarcity. It was, therefore, not surprising that at times my "bag" was small and that I frequently returned altogether empty-handed. Still, I used to enjoy hugging my rifle and waiting, after the manner of Mr. Micawber, for something to turn up. And if nothing turned up, well, it didn't matter; I knew I had had "a day in the country" and that was quite good enough for me. Besides, even if I never saw so much as a single head of game to fire at, there was always a possibility of my seeing something else of jungle life that was new and unknown to me. So I took my chances whenever they came, no matter how hopeless the prospects, and once, at any rate, I was amply rewarded for my pains.

On the day in question, things seemed hardly more promising than usual. The evening before, a minor magnate from a village close by had come to my tent and offered me his services if I wanted to shoot. Of course he swore that game abounded, and, equally of course, I did not believe one-tenth of what he said. This inevitable preliminary over, we got to business, made our terms, hatched our plot, and agreed to start before daybreak next morning. It was bitterly cold when my bearer Sher Khan came to call me, and, for a moment or two, I felt I greatly preferred the company
of my little camp-bed to that of the genteel poacher who, for a consideration, had condescended to place his invaluable services at my disposal. However, Sher Khan was inexorable, and after a few minutes my numbed fingers were struggling desperately with breeches buttons and leggings; a cup of hot tea was gradually warming my interior economy, whilst the dull thud of my pony's hoofs fell on my ear urging me to be quick and "get a move on" my patient, shivering mount whose coat was staring like a hedgehog's.

We were off well before the sun was up, and for some miles travelled at a fast walk through fields and scattered villages. Near one of the latter we passed the camp of the "Collector Sahib," all wrapped in peaceful slumber. I feared we might disturb the great man's dreams if the "pie-dogs" gave tongue, but so intense was the cold that even the noisiest of the village curs thought it better to remain quietly in their miserable shelters than to come out for their usual yap at the passing stranger. So we moved on in silence and, but for the patter of my pony's feet and the shuffling of those of the natives behind me, not a sound broke the stillness of the morning air. We emerged from the last village just as the sun's rays topped the horizon and showed up clearly the fantastic forms of the dense smoke-clouds that hung in great belts above the native hovels; they were weird and strange to look upon, these smoke-belts, as they swayed gently to and fro, but we quickly turned our backs on them and their nauseous, stifling smell, and were glad to breathe the purer atmosphere of the jungle that lay before us.

The country certainly looked promising, and my hopes rose steadily only to fall bit by bit as we scanned one likely spot after another without finding any game at all. Suddenly a magnificent black buck sprang up out of some high grass not eighty yards in front of me and went off with characteristic bounds. As bad luck would have it I was carrying my shot-gun at the moment, and the coolie who held my rifle had, of course, dropped behind, in spite of all my injunctions that he must stick to me like a leech. So I lost the buck as well as my temper, but resolved to shoulder the rifle myself for the rest of the day.

The sun was high in the heavens before we spied another good black buck. He was one of a herd that was lying down in the shade of some low trees on a piece of ground difficult to approach. My stalk failed, and I was about to seek consolation in sandwiches when I thought it would be wise to withdraw the cartridge I had
left in the chamber of my rifle. I pulled the bolt and out flew the case, but to my surprise the bullet itself remained firmly stuck in the barrel whence nothing that I could do would move it. This was most annoying. Here I was miles from the battery with at least six hours of precious daylight before me, with black buck in the neighbourhood and a useless rifle in my hands! However, things were not so bad as they seemed. My genteel poacher, who styled himself my "shikari" for the day, came to the rescue and put forward the one and only sound suggestion he had made since we started. He told me there was a village a mile or two out of our way where dwelt a "lohar" (native iron-worker) who would doubtless be able to force out the bullet with an iron rod. The lohar was found in due course, a few vigorous blows applied to the end of a stiff wire removed the obstructing bullet, and I had nothing left to complain of but the loss of time occasioned by our détour through the lohar's village. About this I, of course, did the usual "grouse," little dreaming that the circuitous route we had been compelled to follow would lead me to a spot where I was to witness a sight rarely beheld by any white man, even though his years in India were many.

We had put the village not more than a mile or so behind us when I noticed some grass huts of unusual design. I asked what they were and was told that they belonged to Kanjahs, or gipsies, who spent their days catching snakes and lived on the flesh of wild animals, including jackal. This information was of interest, so I ordered a quarter-right-wheel and made towards the dwellings.

As we approached the Kanjah women ran away, but the males came forward a few yards to meet us and then stood staring in sullen silence, evidently none too pleased about our intrusion. For some moments we stood facing each other without saying a word and I had time to take stock of the men before me. They were magnificent specimens of humanity; none of them appeared to carry a spare pound of flesh anywhere, and amongst the adults there was not one under six feet in height. Their long lithe figures were but scantily covered with clothing, and under their shaggy black hair peered eyes that had the unmistakable look of the wild man in them.

At last I broke the ice by addressing a few words of Urdu to one of their number, but so hopelessly "jungly" was the abrupt reply I received that I could not understand a syllable. Turning to my "shikari" for assistance, I told him to say that I did not wish to trouble my hosts in any way, but merely desired to see their snakes
The Absorbent-Stone

if they had any they could show me. Judging by the tone, the answers given to my interpreter were as surly as the one vouchsafed to me, and it soon became evident that the sooner we made ourselves scarce the better would the Kanjahs be pleased. Before we turned to go, however, I pulled out a handful of small coins and gave a few to one of the men who appeared rather less stand-offish than the rest, and in doing so I took good care to let the others see what my hand contained.

Their attitude changed instantly. They smiled, became talkative, and showed every sign of wishing to establish better relations; they consulted together for a few seconds, and then offered to show me some snakes on condition that I remained where I was and did not approach any closer to their dwellings. To this I readily agreed, and a few moments later half-a-dozen brown figures were bounding through the jungle, towards another group of huts, at a pace that would have done credit to a Zulu. After a few minutes they reappeared bearing a number of firmly closed spherical baskets which they arranged in a circle around the spot I stood on. At a given signal from one of the men the lids were thrown open, when out of each basket there appeared the ugly heads of three or four cobras. For a moment the reptiles appeared dazzled by the sun, then they slowly uncoiled their subtle bodies and glided smoothly out of their prisons on to the ground. There they lay, or perhaps I should say sat, at least a score of them, writhing and hissing with expanded hoods, and heads swaying from side to side. They were, of course, perfectly harmless, as all had been fanged, but there is something peculiarly vindictive looking about a cobra roused to anger, and rarely have I seen any picture more perfectly illustrative of concentrated spite and hatred than was presented by the living ring now formed around me.

After watching the creatures for a while, I told the man to put them back in their baskets, and offered a reward of eight annas for every cobra they could catch in the jungle in my presence. My offer was accepted with the greatest alacrity, and I was soon striding rapidly across country with my strange acquaintances. We walked for a mile or so and then stopped in front of a low akh bush, under which was a hole that I could not, for the life of me, have recognised to be the outlet of a snake’s burrow. I said it looked like an ordinary rat-hole, but the Kanjahs assured me that a couple of cobras lived there, and they forthwith proceeded to prove the correctness of their assertion.

While the rest withdrew a short distance, one of the men, who...
W. F. Reichwald

had provided himself with a toomrie (wooden whistle), and had tucked under his left arm a steel rod with a hook at one end, took post in front of the hole and began the "magic" that was to entice the snakes from their safe retreat. The sound of his toomrie was not unlike that of the pipes used by certain native regiments, and it alternated, after every few bars, with a weird chant delivered in a clear, high-pitched voice. As the man played and sang in turn, he kept up a quaint dance accompanied by gestures that became more or less ferocious as the strains of the music rose and fell. How long this performance lasted I cannot say; I was too deeply engrossed in what I saw to take much note of time, and I hardly knew whether to rivet my attention more closely on the hole in the ground, or on the antics of the strange figure before me. My gaze was still travelling swiftly backwards and forwards from one to the other, when suddenly the man darted forward and, with incredible rapidity, made a lunge at the hole. The bright steel rod shot straight to the ground like a flash of lightning and then swished to one side, carrying with it, in the crook, a huge male cobra hooked just behind the head.

The whole thing had happened so quickly that I simply could not believe my eyes. There was the cobra without a doubt, but it seemed the men must have deceived me in some manner. I felt sure I must have been mesmerised, and made to see that which could never have occurred in actual fact. So I feigned anger, told the man it was all "bandish and sàzish" (humbug and trickery), and swore he had had the snake concealed in his clothes. This he firmly and solemnly denied, and, to prove his honesty, he offered to take off all his clothes and to catch another cobra in the same way. He declared the female was there too, and that, if I would but have patience, he would capture her as well. Then he divested himself of his garments, till not a rag remained but the smallest of loin-cloths, and the puggri wound about his head; but, before he resumed his incantations the male cobra had first to be secured.

The brute, apparently realising its helplessness, had made no effort to escape; it simply sat there enraged and baffled, hissing and writhing after the manner of its kind. As its captor approached, it raised itself higher and turned to face the long, lean hand and fore-arm extended towards it. Strange indeed was the similarity between the body of the beast and the limb of the man, but stranger still was the similarity of movement when they began the struggle for supremacy. As the snake advanced so did the hand withdraw, keeping always just out of reach. When the snake retired, the
hand followed instantly, ready to seize the initiative the moment the enemy gave way. Like two armies in the field they sought to take each other in flank; the snake apparently aiming at the wrist of the man, the man bent on seizing the neck of the snake behind the venomous head.

The smoothness with which the two combatants moved was wonderful to behold; there was something uncanny about them too, and so equally were they matched that, to my unpractised eye, it appeared as though neither would ever gain a definite advantage over the other. Yet the chances seemed to lie in favour of the cobra; it seemed incredible that a human hand, however skilled, could close upon that circling, swaying head, and yet avoid the fatal fangs. But the limb of the man was itself so snake-like in its poise and outline, that there might have been two cobras, each striving to deliver the lightning stroke that would give the one the mastery over the other. The swell of the half-closed hand looked like the inflated hood, whilst the wrist and forearm strangely resembled the portion of the cobra’s body raised above the ground.

The other Kanjahs and I had formed a ring around the pair, and squatted low so that we might observe the better. No one spoke, nor stirred hand or foot, for they were as keenly interested as I was. Again I kept no count of time, and I was still gazing intently when the crisis came, with a suddenness that defies description. Before I could realise what was occurring the hand shot forward and, with unerring aim, gripped the head and held it as though in a vice. Violently, indeed, did the body of the snake curl and wriggle, but all in vain. The fatal jaws were pressed tightly together between thumb and forefinger, whilst the palm of the hand closed firmly round the neck.

The deed was done, and a few minutes later the snake was safely stowed away in one of the spherical baskets held ready for its reception. I hoped I should see the animal fanged, but, though the Kanjahs explained to me how they would set about it, they were evidently all too anxious to tackle the female before they did anything else. So I, unfortunately, gave way to them, with the result that I never saw a cobra fanged at all.

The details connected with the unearthing of the female were exactly the same as those I have already described, but on this occasion I checked the time. It was, unless my memory plays me false, just forty-five seconds from the first sound of the tooturie. The actual capture was also to be effected as before, but the man was nearly destined “to eat defeat” in this second encounter.
The female cobra, though rather smaller and weaker than the male, was equally full of fight and certainly quicker. Her "sparring" was wonderful, she kept her adversary at bay with consummate skill, and resorted to the offensive more frequently than her spouse had done. Yet the Kanjah was not to be outwitted easily, and for a while the game was well contested. At last the man believed his chance had come; he seized it, but ere his hand closed round the cobra's neck, she struck and plunged her fangs into a finger. It was well and smartly done, but just too late, for she could not withdraw; the hand came on despite its wound, and held her closely in its iron grip.

A low exclamation of surprise, half gasp, half murmur, broke from the other Kanjahs when they saw the blow go home, and whilst the snake was being disposed of, the murmur grew to a continuous chatter. It was evident that even they did not like one of their number being bitten, though it seemed hard to believe that the occurrence was a very unusual one. The injured man was immediately attended to, or rather, he at once began to attend to his wound himself. After squatting on his hunkers, he first took from a red cloth bag a piece of dried wood, or coarse root, and with this he drew rings round his forearm. The wood was light in colour, though whether it was prepared in a special manner I cannot say. It certainly left clearly visible grey lines, but these may have been no more than light scratches, that would naturally show up on the dry, dark skin of a native; at all events when I afterwards tried a bit of the root on my own wrist, no marks of any kind appeared. In answer to a question as to the object of the rings, I was told that the poison would not travel beyond them, and when I suggested that this must surely be a case of mere superstition, I was solemnly contradicted, and presented with a piece of the root for my own use in case of need. I kept it for a long while, and I believe I still have it somewhere amongst the curious odds and ends I have collected at different times.

The next step in the Kanjah's cure consisted in his squeezing out of the finger (the second of his right hand) as much blood as he could. He twisted it, bent it, and massaged it until two drops appeared where the fangs had entered, one on each side of the first joint. Then he moistened with saliva the top of the finger between the punctures, and placed on it a small circular stone, black in colour, and about the size and thickness of a halfpenny. This was, no doubt, the so-called "absorbent stone," about which a certain amount has, from time to time, been written. I know
little or nothing of its nature or properties, but I can testify that
the stone I saw used stuck firmly to the flesh as soon as it was
placed in position. The man moved his hand about freely and
turned it over, back downwards, but the stone remained where
it was until some twenty minutes had elapsed, when it dropped off
of its own accord.

The falling of the stone was the signal for the break-up of the
interested group of spectators, who had been watching the pro­
cceedings. The Kanjahs now appeared quite happy; they gathered
up their traps, snake-baskets, &c., and strolled cheerfully back to
camp. I went back with them and remained in their company for
an hour or more, but no further thought was given to the principal
incident of the day, nor did the cobra's victim appear any the
worse for his injury. My chief desire was, naturally enough, to
secure the stone, but the Kanjahs flatly refused to part with
it under any circumstances, although I offered them every anna I
had on me—some fifteen rupees all told, a small fortune for a
wandering gipsy tribe.

Thus ended one of the most interesting experiences I have
ever met with in the jungle. It is not my purpose to enter into
the merits of the case, or to discuss the many theories that might
be put forward; I merely wish to set down the facts as I saw
them with my own eyes. There can be no doubt that the man
was bitten by the cobra, that both he and his friends were
considerably perturbed in consequence, that he cured himself in the
manner described, and that no orthodox method of treatment was
resorted to, nor even a ligature of any kind was applied.

The shadows were lengthening when I said farewell to my
friends, and I greatly regretted my inability to accept their pressing
invitation to join them in a jackal hunt that was to take place
after dark. I had a good many miles to go back to camp, and I did
not quite know what my Major would say if, in the heart of the
jungle and without permission, I spent a night "on the tiles."

The Kanjah method of jackal hunting, by the way, is simple.
It appears they merely go off into the bush, and there squat down
with their dogs close by them. Next they begin to caterwaul and
to imitate the jackal's mournful, eerie cry until they entice him
to close quarters; then the dogs are loosed, "jack" is collared,
and served up for dinner the following day.

Their method of stealing dogs is equally effective, though how
it is worked I cannot say; I can merely repeat a yarn told me by
a friend of mine who, for a time, commanded the Government
W. F. Reichwald

Remount Depot at Karnal, and to whom I had related my experience of the "absorbent stone." He told me that on one occasion a British infantry regiment was in camp at Karnal for the night, and so, as was his custom when troops passed through, he asked a number of the officers to dine with him. They came and, in the course of the evening, the conversation somehow or other drifted on to the subject of dogs. The guests were full of praise for the animals they owned—one had a bulldog that would not let a native come within a mile of his tent; another possessed an Irish terrier, the best watch-dog ever born; a third owned some other breed equally ferocious, &c., &c. So the talk went on whilst my friend sat and listened in silence, knowing full well that a Kanjah camp was pitched within a short mile of the dinner table. When all had had their say, he had his, and he bet them a case of champagne that, if they would allow him to put their guardians to a practical test, he would guarantee that there would not be a single officer's dog left in camp next morning. At first my friend's offer was looked upon as a joke, but when he declared he was serious, and added that the dogs might be secured in any way the owners pleased, the bet was taken. The guests, on their return to camp, fastened up their canine companions in every sort and kind of manner. One was chained to a tent pole, another to his owner's bed, a third to a metal wash-hand-stand, so that he might bring it down with a clatter if he were interfered with in any way; and so on and so forth.

All went well, and the night passed without a sound, but when the officers were roused at dawn there was not a single dog to be seen. It was not till the second mile-stone on the Delhi road was reached that a diminutive Kanjah urchin checked the onward march of the battalion by blocking the road with a dozen dogs, ignominiously attached to bits of string looped round the urchin's fingers.

[Note.—A similar absorbent stone is used by the Indians in Texas.—Ed.]