A LITTLE KNOWLEDGE.

By COLONEL F. SMITH, C.B., C.M.G., D.S.O.

PHASE I.

The advanced guard was well on its way along the narrow track through the dense, evergreen bush.

Grouped about in the open space where the overnight camp had been, soldiers, mostly negroes, of the little column, were standing round expiring wood fires from which faint blue spirals of smoke ascended; for there was a chill air.

Carriers were sitting on, or squatting near, the loads destined to be borne on the straw-padded heads of these substitutes for transport animals and G.S. wagons. An officer and the native headman were bustling about together, re-appointing the loads of the discontented, and searching for heads on which might be toled some of the packages which seemed to be surplus, and were found to be the heaviest. Loud protests could be heard from men who, with a far-away look, had been sitting alongside the lightest objects they had been able to find, as, for example, a roll of straw matting weighing about two pounds.

Around one fire some officers, including the major in command, were enjoying the after-breakfast smoke while their baggage was being packed and dealt out to a ring of selected carriers sitting near them. Suddenly attention was drawn by a sharp cry to one of the carriers, who sprang up and clutched his own left arm, calling out, "Wow, snake done get me."

"Where? Where is it?" said young Stevens excitedly, as he looked fiercely about him, and handled his gun to the danger of the bystanders. Stevens was an earnest soldier, who carried a double-barrelled shot gun in the hope of emulating Colonel Burnaby.

"Look ahm daddy," came from the mouths of half a dozen carriers, delighted at being in the piece, as they pointed eagerly to a speckled reptile winding itself away and already within a few feet of cover. Dashing forward, the brave Stevens—just as the serpent, allowing curiosity to overcome wisdom, paused, reared its head and looked back—let it have two barrels simultaneously and blew it all to bits. The hero turned towards his fellow officers triumphantly as he opened the ejector.

"Well done, Stevens. But where's the doctor?" exclaimed Major Ironsmith-Farrier, glancing around.

"Gone on with Martin, sir," answered two or three voices.

"Good Lord! Something must be done quickly, at all events," and the major, who had been through a first-aid course and rather fancied himself, secretly glad to have a chance in the absence of Wilson, cheerfully took on the treatment of the poor carrier. The last-mentioned, never in
his life having been the object of such solicitude, was making the most of his wound.

"Must make him drunk," said the O.C., and an officer soon dashed up with a canteen lid nearly full of rum. Gulping down the beverage, the victim gasped and began an appreciative grin, but, suddenly recollecting himself, groaned instead.

"You'll find a bottle of brandy in that box over there," cried the director of operations as he threw out the keys from his pocket.

But the major himself had not been idle all these minutes, he was not only directing, but doing. Seizing a piece of stout cord, he bound it tightly round the limb, just below the wound; then he slashed the part with his pocket knife. The native orderly having meantime opened a pannier, the commander grabbed the carbolic acid container and rubbed some of its contents into the scarified area. This made the carrier howl as if he meant it, so brandy was poured into him.

Soon the man was, no doubt, either drunk or dying; for he could not be roused.

Responsibility had now to be transferred, though the major was loth to part with his patient, in whom he naturally took pride.

So we arrive at a further stage in the management of the case.

**Phase II.**

Martin and Wilson were sitting on the brim of a slope while the men not on sentry lay around, during the first halt. After having marched along a track walled-in with bush, it was delightful to get away from the sensation of being shut up. The officers smoked in silence as they gazed down rapturously on the mass of tree-tops; many trees were in flower; numerous butterflies and birds were flitting about; a surface liveliness in this upper world, in vivid contrast to the sombre shades beneath. The gorgeous carpet spread down into the valley, and up the steep reverse, until it merged into the bluish-white haze about the foot of the distant hills. Sounds as of torrential water rose from the depths of the gorge.

"It's a lovely world . . . in parts. But . . . ."

"Fall in!" shouted Martin, breaking in on the doctor's meanderings, as he and Wilson came suddenly out of their peaceful reverie on hearing running feet in the rear; and the officer hastily disposed his men.

There was no cause for alarm as far as concerned human enemies. A panting soldier appeared, saluted, and handed to the officer one of those flimsy bits of paper used for pencilled messages in the field.

Martin passed the document to Wilson, who read:—

"Dear Wilson,

"This carrier has been bitten by a snake (poisonous). We have given him a canteen-lidful of rum and the best part of a bottle of old liqueur brandy. He is now fairly drunk, and I send him along to you. Yours,

J. Ironsmith-Farrier."
Soon appeared a cavalcade consisting of four carriers having on their respective heads the ends of the cross-bars of a hammock pole. Suspended in the hammock was the limp body of a native. Alongside walked the medical orderly.

Wilson heard stertorous gurgling before he reached the hammock. Carrier Dirty-boy—to give him his official designation—was evidently in a bad way. He was getting in a little air at long intervals with difficulty. He could not be said to be more black in the face than usual, but he bore a congested look about the face and neck generally.

Wilson promptly seized the man’s tongue, with immediate relief to Dirty-boy—but he could not stand there holding on to a slippery tongue; so he handed that part of Dirty-boy’s anatomy to the orderly, who hung on to it with such determined energy that the portion in view got longer and longer, and there seemed to be danger of the whole thing coming away in his hands.

The next thing was to remove the ligature from the limb, already swollen as though about to burst, and dress the wound—work intermitted by an occasional chest-squeeze whenever it seemed that the patient had given up breathing.

Meantime, a soldier had been sent back for the panniers, and from one of them a pair of long forceps was produced. By the time Wilson had clamped Dirty-boy’s tongue and tied the forceps to the hammock, the fretting advanced guard officer moved off his party. The orderly was to walk by his charge to see that the tongue was out, and to summon the doctor if breathing stopped.

The four carriers expressed their disgust at having to carry their drunken comrade—they, no doubt, each and all, envied him.

For some time Dirty-boy’s fate was a matter of speculation. Wilson had to squirt in a few hypodermics. Some thirty hours later the sick man opened his eyes, looked round, remarked, “Me ’ead dey ’urt me,” and promptly relapsed into lethargy. In this state he was deposited in the hospital of a bush station occupied en route by the column.

Paying a visit the next morning before marching off Wilson found the hero sitting up, smiling. He said he had taken some breakfast but was feeling stiff and sore all over, so he was allowed to remain behind in hospital. As the doctor moved off Dirty-boy remarked:—

“Dat big medicine, Sah! for true.”

Wilson, of course, was rather pleased with the result of the combined treatment, and thought to himself, “Something in these old empirical methods, after all—remember my grandfather telling me that a bottle of whiskey was the thing for snake-bite.”

As the force was about to resume its forward move, the headman of carriers, on being informed of the marvellous recovery of the carrier of whom he had perforce to lose the services, admitted that it was indeed
wonderful. He himself had known men die from less drink than that—still, it was in its way a pleasant death—quite a waste of rum of course—he and several more might have been made quite happy with that amount—an undue favouring of Dirty-boy—supposed that was because he always carried the Major's box.

"But it was to cure the snake-bite," said Wilson.

"A mere nothing, that bite—not as if a bad snake had bitten him," replied headman Aliblack, though not exactly in the words as here written.

"My God, my God!" cried the healer; a chill in his heart though he was not primarily responsible, "that snake not poisonous?"

"What, sah? What t'ing dat? Me no sabby de word."

"Dat snake no' able for kill person?" explained the officer.

"No, sah!" and the headman lifted his eyebrows, "He just bite; that, no more."

"It's no use talking. Those natives are just lying. They're full of superstitious ideas about offending the snake tribes. The man was for it all right," insisted the Major, when Wilson gave him the news. "Anyhow," he added, "it's up to you to replace that brandy."

So Wilson supplied a bottle of "Three Star" from the medical supplies. His C.O. accepted it with a "grouse" that it was better than nothing, but could not make up for his old liqueur stuff.

When seen some long time after the event Dirty-boy bore a very fine mark on his arm. He showed no resentment, indeed he smiled joyfully at the recollection of his gratuitous orgy.

To this day Major Ironsmith-Farrier is fond of relating the story of how he treated the snake-bite. The reptile gets bigger and bigger. When last heard of it was "a deadly puff-adder, my boy, and as thick as a man's wrist."