

NARROW ESCAPES FROM COBRAS.

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DURING a long residence in India, my acquaintance with the cobra has been a fairly intimate one. Unlike other wild animals, he is as much at home in the bungalow compound as in the jungle, but is more frequently met with far from the haunts of man.

My duty as an engineer in the Public Works Department has frequently led me into the wildest parts of India, where as many snakes would be seen in a week as it would take a year to find in a town.

On one occasion I was riding with a friend, and the road lay on the edge of some low jungle. On the left was the face of a precipice, and on the right a few loose stones, leaving us a narrow path. My companion was in front, and had passed a certain heap of stones. Just as I reached this heap, I suddenly caught sight of a dark moving object, which I immediately recognised as a large snake, partly coiled up. I was riding at a sharp trot, and had no time to check my horse. Suddenly I saw the snake rise to strike at my leg, and I recognised it as a cobra by its hood. As he made his spring, I instinctively presented the sole of my boot to meet the attack. He struck it fair in the centre, and before he could recover himself I was far out of reach.

It is very seldom that a cobra attacks man without provocation. In fact, I believe that in the cases recorded it is not proved that the snake making the attack was a true cobra. It is more probable that it was a hamadryad, a hooded snake, somewhat similar to the cobra, but growing to about twice its length. The true cobra never exceeds seven feet. Whether the attack made on me was by a cobra or by a hamadryad, I had no time to see. At the time I concluded that it was certainly a cobra.

I have heard several stories of English officers being pursued by cobras, which they had disturbed; and the natives believe that under provocation they will give chase.

The two following experiences were with cobras, and took place in my bungalow.

One morning I was sitting at my writing-table, or desk, one of the usual pattern, with a set of drawers on each side, extending about half-way down, and with an opening for the knees. The table was placed close to the wall, between two doors opening out on a low veranda. I was busy writing, and paid no attention to the fowls, which were scratching about in the compound, crowing and clucking after the fashion of their kind. In spite of my preoccupation, my attention was attracted by the persistent way in which a little pet bantam cock

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which stood in the veranda just outside the door, behaved, as if terrified by the approach of a hawk. I was annoyed, for there was no apparent cause for his excitement. I looked up to see if there was anything to account for his unusual efforts to attract attention, and as I did so, it struck me that there was a gleam of intelligence in his eye. As he was rather a spoiled favourite, I thought it was simply a reminder that it was time for his usual handful of grain, and continued my work.

Directly my head bent to the desk he set up a shriller cry than ever. I grew angry, and looking round hastily for my ruler, with the intention of throwing it at the noisy little wretch, I glanced at him, and, as he caught my eye, I saw him give a meaning look at the floor beyond my table. This was so distinct that I looked over the side of the table, and there, immediately at my feet, was a large cobra, with his head raised and hood expanded, in readiness to strike. At the moment I caught sight of him he was turning his head from me towards the bantam, as if in doubt which to attack, or from which side he was to be attacked. I could see the spectacles, which every cobra has on the back of its hood, and which are only distinct when it is expanded.

One spring carried me out of my chair to the lounge, from which I took a cushion. Armed with this and a stick, I cautiously approached the snake, which had now taken shelter under the table. By holding the cushion well in front of me in one hand, and presenting it to him, I got him to strike it. This irritated the creature, and he came out a little to follow the cushion, which was still held ready to receive his attack. As soon as he was clear of the table, and I could get room to strike, I made short work of him with the stick. This was not by any means the first cobra I had killed in this way.

Though I left my seat somewhat abruptly, I think the bantam beat me. Directly he saw that he had attracted my attention, he turned with a scream, and made off with all the strength of his little wings and legs.

You may be sure that the little fellow lived to an honoured and pampered old age, and that I took prompt steps to protect my fowl-house from snakes, who make the greatest havoc among fowls.

Not very long after this I was sitting as usual at the same desk, dressed in loose pyjamas, as the weather was sultry. The thermometer stood at about 112° Fahrenheit in the shade.

As I wrote I happened to move my feet, and on doing so I heard a hiss. Thinking it was my cat, I went on writing, and was soon again absorbed in my work; for the cat often got under the desk to sleep. After a while I drew up my feet to take them out of the cat's way. Directly I did so, I heard the same hiss, and felt a slight movement of

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the leg of my pyjamas. I at once looked under the desk, and there saw a cobra, with head raised about fifteen inches, and hood expanded.

My first impulse was naturally to place the length of the room between us, and then to kill the reptile. This I soon did, and then, feeling an irritation on my leg, I examined it. I did not think I had been struck, but, to my horror, I found two small punctures at about the same distance apart as are the fangs of a cobra. It was thus clear that I had been struck.

Some months before I had, in conversation with a snake-charmer, asked him what remedy he used for protection, in case he was bitten. With a great show of secrecy, and protestations that he would do it for no one else, he presented me with half a dozen pills, which he assured me were an infallible cure. I did not believe the man, and had put the pills on my desk, and forgotten all about them.

In my present emergency I suddenly remembered them, and took two. Next I called my butler, cashier, and head writer, and told them I had been bitten. At any other time their faces would have upset my gravity, but just then I was in a more serious frame of mind.

I at once drank off a tumbler of brandy, scribbled a note to my bankers by way of will, making my clerks witness my signature; and then gave myself up to the butler, ordering him and my peons, who had come in, most stringently to keep me walking up and down the veranda for at least an hour.

The brandy had no effect upon me, and I took another dose without any resulting sensations of intoxication.

Turn after turn they walked me up and down the veranda, till I was fairly exhausted and my light garments were wet through with perspiration. I knew that my only hope of safety was to keep moving, so as to force the heart to work.

As to my feelings at the time, I need not speak. I have often looked death in the face pretty closely, but this time he walked at my side, and breathed coldly on my cheek, with a familiarity that I shudder to recall even now.

After a couple of hours I felt that the effects of the poison had passed off, and that it would be safe for me to rest. And gladly enough I did so.

In proof of the fact that I did actually receive some poison, I may state that, around the spot where I was bitten, a circular patch of hair some six inches in diameter, turned perfectly white, and remains so to this day.

The above incidents were related to the writer as the personal experiences of a retired officer of the Indian Public Works Department, who spent twenty years in India, and are true in every detail.