

THE SNAKES' PARADISE.

By W. A. FRASER.

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The Borongos islands lie about half way between Calcutta and Bangkok. The snakes die they go to the Borongos. That is their paradise; there they hold high carnival. I spent three years among them and know of these things. From the giant python down to the deadly krait they are all there, all the ophidians. Even the salt water snakes, that are all poisonous—they, too, are there.

Two Europeans had preceded me on the Borongos, so there was considerable history on tap when I landed, and we rapidly acquired names. One can't live among snakes without studying them, they insist upon it.

An eternal war raged on the island between the forest growth and the sea. The jungle crept down from the hills and swept the beach, and the sea rushed up and tried to wrest it from the grasp of the giant creeper and its more stately brothers of the timber growth. The little clearings, worked into tiny rice fields like yellow mosaics, by the natives, but specks on the green map of the island's extent.

Our bungalow was built on disputed territory; a bit of sand beach inside of a barrier of coral reef, sea-swept at full tide, over which the hill streams spray. There was no water on the island, but the rains were on the side and were steady.

Upon my first introduction to the dining room I observed a long-handled fish spear placed within easy reach. "Spear fish from the verandah?" I asked Mr. Cooke, nodding towards it.

"No, snakes," he replied laconically. As we sat down to the table I noticed Cooke and the other veteran raise their eyes instinctively and scan the leaf roof.

"By Jove! there's one!" I exclaimed, cocking my head for the spot. "Look out, you fellows; don't be so easily deceived, a long, big-headed green snake. It was an aberrant, or tree snake, and poisonous. Then we ate our supper in peace.

Scarcely a day passed during the rainy season that I was not bitten. I was not killed in the bungalow. During the hot dry months they burrowed; when the rains came they were flooded out of their holes and were always heading for the pleasant shelter of our leaf thatch. Also there were rats there for their food. There was no scolding to the bungalow, so we could plainly see the creatures coiled up between the leaves or lying along the bamboos of the roof. It wasn't exactly soothing to the nerves. No man went into a dark room without a light; no man put on a boot without first turning it inside down; nor was my own bed left dry or night, without the strong mosquito curtain tucked in all around.

After I had been there about two weeks and my nerves had become the sum of my existence I got my first fright. I was awake from a sound sleep by a stunning pain in my thigh. As I awoke I threw my hands up, and a soft, mottled body went hurtling over my head against the mosquito net. I realized that I had been bitten by a snake. I did not wait to find the opening. I was on the side of the curtain, but came away from that bed very fast. My room was dark, but in the next was a light. Without unnecessary delay I arrived in that room.

"Get up, Bill!" I said. "I've been bitten by a cobra."

"If you don't get out of bed and let me sleep you'll be bitten by a club," responded Bell drowsily. That was because practical jokes had been our only form of amusement up to that time.

"For God's sake get up!" I begged him, and something in my voice told it was no joke this time.

Jumping up hastily he took the light and examined the spot where I had felt the pain. There, sure enough, were two tiny punctures, such as a cobra's fangs would have made, framed by a drop of red blood. Then Bell became frightened again. The talking had aroused Cooke in the next room. "What's the shindy, you fellows?" he inquired, sleepily. "Going to have a smoke?"

"I've been bitten by a cobra, and haven't an hour to lose," I replied dramatically. "Come on, we'll kill him for us." I added and the others followed in ominous silence.

Cooke held the light and Bell lifted the curtain with commendable caution while I stood with a heavy stick ready to have my revenge. There was nothing to be seen. "He's under the pillow—throw him over my head."

Bell quickly turned the pillow over, and a dark body scuttled down the white sheet. It was a rat!

"Let him go," I said. The stick dropped from my hand, the perspiration found its way through the closed, drawn pores of my forehead, and my heart went rippety-tat, a hundred and twenty to the minute. It's no good to feel that you've been bitten by a cobra.

Barnum's man in the east, told me that he had overfed him. When we brought the python in, the evening of his capture, Rania, an Oorah, fell called upon to tell me a little of the habits of these big creatures.

He had known a python once, many yards in length it was, who had a tooth for fish. He would go to a large pond, twist his tail around a tree on one side, stretch his body across, grasp a tree on the other side with his teeth, and, swinging his body like a hammer out and forth, throw all the water out upon the land. Then, you see, he ate the fish.

There were also close calls in that place. We were sitting on the verandah one evening, and like men who are bottled up together, speedily got into a violent argument over something that had happened in America. Three of us were in pajamas, the usual evening dress, while Townsend, who had just come down from Akyah, had only taken his coat off, and was wearing a shirt with starched cuffs. This was a trivial thing, and we rather felt the innovation, but it had much to do with the subsequent events.

The argument had reached that point at which something had got to be done. A fight was out of the question; it was too hot for violent exercise.



HE WAS TO CLEVER TO STICK HIS HEAD INTO THE BAMBOO NOOSE

Then he ran diligently across the field many acres of fields—before he stopped. Presently the Memashib called loudly for her dinner and the cook went in with two friends. It was a terrible thing to do, but Sundoo had taken gin, or arrack, or something from the black bottle, and with drunken miscalculation thought the Memashib would be pleased with the exhibition. When she faintly, it occurred to him that he had failed in his efforts to amuse; so we went back, cheaply enough, and put the king cobras in the box, scolding them for having frightened his mistress.

It is not written in any book that punishment Sundoo got for that when the snobbish came home, but Sundoo knows. He will never forget.

After that the hamadryas were sent up to my bungalow at the Borongos. I did not know that their sole article of diet was other snakes, and tried them with rats, mice, frogs and birds, and they would eat none of these.

One day a dispirited young rock snake, about four feet long, swaggered into the bungalow. Now the hamadryas had always appeared as though they were spoiling for a fight, so I transferred the larrikin to their box. His advent started a civil war; the two cobras rolled up their sleeves and went at it with a fierceness that convinced that all the fight had been knocked out of his mate, the conqueror pulled the intruder from the other corner by his head and swallowed him. It took about six minutes for him to accomplish this feat.

All the bones in a snake's head are loose and they can even shove one maxillary, or side of the jaw, forward, independent of the other, and the cobra showed this snake straight down his throat by means of these flexible teeth. That solved the food question. After that when snakes strolled into the bungalow they wound up in the hamadryas' box. There was always a battle and always a feast afterward.

The hamadryas were voracious creatures, two, and sometimes fought each other when there was really no purpose in it. When I caught them at this I used to pull the slide door in the top of the box and whip them with a small cane.

Every morning the servants soused the cobra box with water to cleanse it. One day while it was being washed out I heard a great commotion and cries of "The snake is out!" The servants all fled except a "China-Burmo lad named Joe." He told me the cobra had gone into the provision room, and I picked up a short bamboo snake and went on a shikar for the nags. I found him among some coconuts on the floor. When I went in he raised his body about two feet and hissed loudly. I tapped him on the nose with the bamboo, and, remembering the whippings I had given him in the box he dropped and glided in and out among the coconuts. But he was too clever to stick his head in my bamboo noose; he went under it and over it, but never through it. Once or twice he raised up threateningly, but a tap from the bamboo brought him down again.

At last, just as he had evaded a carefully planned trap and was gliding by, I impatiently forgot all caution, and possessed of a sudden dashed out my hand and grabbed him by the neck. My hold was so close to his head that there was no chance of his striking me while I held on. I could feel the pulling back of his muscles and gripped him in much strength. As I emerged from the store-room even Joe took to his heels.

might be well; he had nerve and judgment even close to that of a shikar. Standing behind my chair at dinner, Joe asked me in an awed voice: "Master not afraid of snake?" "No," I replied scornfully, "no snake hurt me." But then you see Joe had also taken to the jungle and had not seen my face when I was loaded up with the bestly things.

Cooke was a man of much pitiless faith and once, when I was away, a snake charmer came along and persuaded him to loan him the hamadryas for a few days. He would break them in and bring them back. Perhaps he did break them, but I never knew.

The hamadryas is wonderfully like a bulldog. He is pugnacious in the extreme—always ready to fight. He is the most terrible snake among all the ophidians; he is big and strong and quick and his senses are as sharp as that of the cobra di capelin. But with all this he seems to have the same tolerant good nature toward those he feels have a right over him that the bulldog possesses. The snake charmer smote him dole. Here in an acute attack.

A friend of mine living in Kroyok Phyu had a little boy about 6 years old, who used to play beneath the bungalow. He often chattered about his playmate, the snake, but no attention was paid to this. One day the father saw the boy squatting on the sand under the bungalow throwing pebbles and little sticks at a huge hamadryas, which was gliding about, not offering to hurt the little fellow. But when the man appeared the cobra became enraged and attacked him, causing him to beat a hasty retreat. He got his gun and shot the king cobra dead.

It seemed that the hamadryas had been nesting in one of the numerous rat holes under the bungalow, and the little boy had played with the snake there, but if I remember right they never saw the other one.

The dabra Russell is a sluggish beast, and you possess it as a pet. You may step over a devil and he will be apparently asleep, touch him and he will strike with the rapidity of lightning and the fatalness of a Borgin. The danger from the dabra is his brother in sin, the karait, a great, heavy, thick-skinned, pig-like creature. The cobra will get out of the way if he can; these two will not. I have often brought my foot down on the neck of a dabra as he lay in the sun and watched the ugly, squirring head with its big fangs like a rat's tail.

When I was stationed in the jungle look of Kroyok Phyu a friend wrote asking for a good specimen of the dabra. He wanted him put in a bottle of alcohol, without being skinned, and given a last supper. I secured a snake from the roof of the bungalow and carried him into my verandah. I got a large pickle bottle and tried to shove him into the neck of it with a pair of short fire tongs. The snake was impatiently pushing and green, a last supper. Presently the tongs slipped from his neck, and as I reached to catch him again he struck.

His action was so quick that I had no time to draw back the sixteenth of an inch, but I did not get hurt. I was in contact with the tongs as I held them out for somebody he just failed to get home. I fancy that the nasal plates of his armored head touched my thumb.

On one occasion the sister of one of our party spent a few days on the Borongos. She slept in a small bungalow beside ours. The second morning, just after daylight, we were startled by piercing screams from the little bungalow, and rushed out in time to see her coming staggering out of her quarters in sleeping garments only. It was the usual thing—a snake.

When she first opened her eyes she discovered a huge reptile six feet long coiled on top of the mosquito net, just over her head. The warthog of her husband evidently attracted him to that spot. He was promptly killed.

The little tales that I have told here of snakes are absolutely true. There are others in connection with the natives, more horrible, dealing with the death of the poor creatures from snake bite.

Emir Ally's father was killed on the Borongos by a huge python—crushed to death, and others of the natives were killed also. Yearly in India a matter of thousands die of snake bite. I never knew but one man to recover—and his recovery was only partial, if fancy.

Dr. Vincent Richards, who was a great authority on poisonous snakes in California, was showing a cobra to a friend. He was holding the snake by the neck with his right hand and pointing at the fangs with the left, when the reptile suddenly struck him on the end of the finger. He had all the appliances at hand, and the prompt action. He recovered, and I saw him a few weeks afterward. But he died in about a year, and friends assured me that he never fully worked off the poison.

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Pure Food None but Advertising of Thoroughly Reliable, Pure and Healthful Foods Will Be Accepted for These Columns.

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