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Second San Francisco Interview

SNAKES AND ELEPHANTS

9 June 1889  San Francisco Examiner

THERE REGISTERED at the Palace Hotel a day or two ago a bronzed featured, dark-eyed man, scarcely over thirty years of age, who during the past few years has had many varied experiences in the interior of India.

This gentleman is Rudyard Kipling, the editor of an English paper in Allahabad called the Pioneer, and his travels throughout India have furnished him with an unlimited store of anecdotes of field and jungle, interesting in the extreme.

Speaking to an EXAMINER reporter the other day, Mr. Kipling said:

“There is no portion of the world where there are so many poisonous reptiles as in the land from which I have just arrived. You have here in California, I understand, a variety of rattlers, tarantulas and scorpions. You just ought to see some of the cobras and kaireits we have in India. I have had some thrilling experiences with them.

“I have been three months coming from the river Ganges to San Francisco,” continued he, “but every morning as I go to put on my boots here at the Palace, I instinctively hurl them across the room to shake them up, and dislodge any snakes that may be in them. This may to you sound like a strange statement, but it is true. You have no idea how plentiful snakes are in many parts of India, and how they are dreaded. The death toll from snake bites there is estimated at 20,000 a year.
“The worst snake we have is the kaireit. Its average length when grown is about fifteen inches. It is found in the dust, and you always know it when you step on it. It is just about the color of the soil, and on this account is hard to see. They come into the houses, as do the cobras, but many of the former are so small that they secrete themselves in out-of-the-way nooks and get in their work when least expected. They give no warning. The cobra bites from a spring. This wriggles like a little worm. I never knew a man to recover. It assumes different shapes and might look like a bit of dirty rag in the road. Its color is a sort of dull chocolate. As these snakes lie low on the ground they are difficult to detect. One reason why there are so many deaths annually is because scarcely anybody wears shoes. The people have been going barefoot for 5,000 years. It is so hot they can’t stand to wear shoes.

“I had a friend in India who, according to custom, had fans in his house in order to keep the air fresh. These fans were in the side of the wall, and were turned, as all of them are there, by native power. One day, when we were at lunch, the natives gave them a violent twitch and a lot of these kaireits rained down on the floor. They were young ones, of course, that had just hatched out, but that don’t [sic] make any difference. The young ones will bite and are just as poisonous as the old ones. These were not over an inch and a half long, but I tell you there was a scrambling to get out of there. It is thus that people have to be constantly on their guard.

“One day I went to remove a picture on the mantel, and what should I see but the shed skin of a cobra. The snake had come in—how or when I did not know—and after he had got rid of his skin, disappeared. May be you think I didn’t hunt for that snake, and afterward step lightly around the floor for some time! But I never found it.

“A friend of mine in Bengal, in the military service, who was a bachelor, one day invited a friend to dinner with him. The cookhouse was, as most cookhouses are in India, about fifty yards from the house. The friend arrived and they talked. Dinner time came, but no request to come to dinner. Half an hour passed and my friend said: ‘Well, I wonder what’s the matter with that beastly cook. He’s quite late.’ They talked on until an hour had passed. Then my friend said: ‘Well, we’ll just go out and see.’ And what do you think they saw? Why,
above the door, with his head swinging from side to side through the
transom and see-sawing back and forth, was a gigantic cobra. The
cooks inside were very much afraid and would not venture out, of
course. The guests raised a shotgun and killed the poisonous cobra,
though it was hard on the house. They thought themselves lucky
though, as may be supposed.

“Nobody ever recovers from a bite of the kaireit, and it is rare that
anybody ever gets over the bite of the cobra. I never knew of but one
case. A doctor in the army there had one that he had half tamed as a
monstrous curiosity. He was exhibiting it one day to some friends
when it bit him in the finger. He was an expert, and his remedies were
right at hand. He instantly applied them and got over it, but if he had
had to walk upstairs even he would have been a dead man. Mind you,
he was a doctor.

“One of my editorial associates on the Pioneer, who belonged to the
Naturalists’ Club of Allahabad, one day brought in a kaireit in a bot-
tle and was exhibiting it to the members. ‘It is dead,’ said he, and he
thought it was, for it was all broken in pieces. All at once the head be-
gan to wriggle and bounce around. It could bite then just as good as it
could before. You may guess there was a scampering. That is a peculi-
arity of these snakes. When you think they are dead they are not.
That is another reason why they are so much dreaded.

“The cobra of which I have spoken is, as you may have read, famous
for its ability to charm whatever it comes in contact with, but I never
dreamed of the powers of the cobra until I went to India. It raises its
self about one-third of its length from the ground, and distending its
great hood, waves itself back and forth. Its hood when open looks like
the snake was cut lengthwise in the breast, a little like an open coat. A
side view of it gives a mottled appearance of the shape of an inverted
pair of spectacles. It waves itself backward and forward, breathing
and blowing in a mysterious way, and the sight is so awful you can’t
take your eyes off it. Its little eyes gleam like two balls of fire, and
when it strikes there is nothing but a blur. It goes so fast.

“The cobra in India is the serpent of romance. Despite the fact that
it is deadly the natives hesitate to kill it. There are few places where
this snake will naturally live that haven’t got cobras. The natives are
so superstitious about them. They vary in length from four to eight
feet. The king cobra, so called, is nothing but a big cobra. The famous snake-charmers of India, of whom I have seen many, exercise a curious art with them. They are able to put them to sleep with the weird music of their bagpipes. The cobra, when about to spring, looks like the devil incarnate.

"A strange thing in India is that every thing in the way of a serpent, a scorpion, tarantula, or wild animal is the color of the background. It matches the soil where it is found. You see a royal Bengal tiger in America or England, and you can tell it right off, but you see it there and someway its stripes do not stand out, and it springs upon you unawares.

"The snakes of India are in Bengal and down south in Madras. These are the home of the snakes. Northwest India is not very snakey. In some places there are so many snakes that it is simply a hell on earth. There are many other snakes than the kinds I have told you of, and many of them are poisonous, but these are the worst. There are also centipedes five inches long, and poisonous lizards that drop their tails off and go right on, thinking thus to delude you, when you have seen them first, and get the drop on them.

"In the Himalayas there are bears, there are also plains bears. These are black and brown. The bears get into the open fields and eat poppy and get drunk. A bear wakened out of his sleep under such circumstances, is in a bad temper, like a drunken man.

"I can tell you something new about the man-eating tiger of India, too. The man-eater is nothing but an old tiger, usually a female, that can no longer catch deer of other wild animals. Man is the easiest thing to catch there is, and when you think about it, you need not wonder. The tiger looks like the ground exactly, sneaks around like a cat—you can never hear it walk and suddenly springs upon you. This man-eater is the tramp among tigers. Sometimes a single man-eater is responsible for as many as 200 deaths.

"The wolf of India is a small, gray animal, looking like the coyote of America. It comes close to the cities and eats up children by the dozens. It also drives deer by relays, but it does not hook a man out of his own cottage as the Indian tiger does. There are no lengths to which that brute won’t go.
“By the way, did you ever see an elephant fight? I mean two big bull elephants pitted against each other? Well, of all the fights they are about the worst. You would think from the resounding whack when the gigantic pachyderms come together that the earth is cracking. There are many of these elephant fights in India, and they always attract large crowds.

“Two big must elephants are usually chosen. They are called must elephants at that season of the year when the males are unusually vicious toward each other. A tinselled mahout is seated in the howdah of each as the monstrous beasts stride into the arena.

“‘Life of my soul’ begins one; ‘go for him! Ah, go for him! Do him, O pride of my heart! Mash him! Mash him! That is right! Go at him again!’

“Whack! Whack! The great brutes come at each other, each mahout urging on his animal to the utmost. They clash together like two great glaciers, twisting and tugging, striving to grasp the other round the neck with his trunk. It is something fearful. Then one of them begins to weaken, perhaps.

“‘Pride of my life!’ shrieks out his rider. ‘Have I not always been with thee and hated thine enemy? Kill him! Kill! Do thou belabor him with great blows and the victory shall be ours!’

“The elephant seems to understand every word. The battle is renewed with a bitterness that cannot be understood. At length one of them gets a firm hold with his trunk and simply annihilates his opponent. Blood is everywhere. The dying elephant gasps helplessly. His enemy stands over him, bleeding and blinded, but with the lordly air of a conqueror.

“‘Have I not always said,’ breaks forth the mahout, as he caresses the victorious beast, ‘that thou wouldst rend thine enemy asunder? Oh, dearer to me than the hope of heaven; my cup is full. Great is the day when we do go forth to battle!’

“Sometimes two big elephants who have been mates, or who have stood side by side in stalls, are led forth to fight. The people are all there and the mahouts who guide them are enthusiastic, but the old elephants can’t see it. They merely blink their eyes at each other, as
much as to say, ‘This is pretty good, but it don’t seem to be right somehow. We’re friends.’

“An elephant that has to be whipped is never whipped by his owner or mahout, but always by two other elephants. They are each given a big piece of steel chain several feet long, and it is terrible the way they lay it on and bring him weak and powerless to subject on. But his owner had better look out. It will be a cold day for him, even in India, when that elephant gets sight of him.

“That is the strange thing about it. He knows who ordered it done. He don’t bear any malice toward the elephants that licked him, but he does toward the instigator of the licking.

“An officer in the army had an elephant that he thought needed correcting, so he had his legs fastened fore and aft with chains, and tied the old fellow to a tree. Then he got two elephants to go at him. They belabored him terribly and brought him to taw.4 ‘Go down and see your elephant now, and see how he looks,’ said a brother officer. ‘Not much,’ replied he, ‘that elephant knows who ordered that done, and I’ll stay away at least ten days till he forgets it.’

“And he did.

“A mahout one day in the arena where I was a spectator, got mad at his elephant and hit him over the head with an iron bar. It was a caution the way the big pachyderm bounced him off and went hunting for that mahout. He cut for ‘tall timber,’ as you say here. He could turn faster than the elephant, but the latter was far too rapid to make it at all amusing for the mahout. The great beast was in a whirlwind of passion, and tore around in the arena as though struck by a cyclone, while paraphernalia flew higher and thither.

“Hundreds of men, women and children rushed about in every direction and fell over each other while the beast was everywhere. I thought scores and scores would be killed, but only the mahout and one old woman, whom the elephant accidentally brushed against. The elephant was careful of hurting anybody else as he could be. He only wanted the mahout. How he managed to avoid hurting the rest is, and always has been, a mystery to me.

“The average Indian native goes hungry in order to keep his elephant. He has got to have him, if he never has anything else. I have
seen princes and kings with scarcely anything to eat, and poor as Job’s turkey, spending £250 a year to keep a white elephant. Kings are plenty in India. White elephants are not. I have seen a dozen kings at one time waiting at a railroad station for a Lieutenant-Governor.

“One particular king I have in mind has a principality about a mile square.

“Without his elephant a king is nowhere. Oftentimes you see silver knives and spoons entwined in the earrings of the great beasts, and sometimes the howdah is trimmed with pure gold.”