

A WILD YARN.

"Tell us a snake-story, doctor."
The demand for this peculiar form of mental refreshment was manifested by the fifth officer of the good ship Chittagong, then steaming northward up the Red Sea at a speed which evoked the tepid ghost of a breeze out of the stagnant stillness simmering over the gulf, and sent Jebel Zagar slipping from bow to quarter in the brief interval between day and darkness. Reckless little of a temperature which might embarrass a salamander, we crowded, seven or eight of us, like true fatuous Britons, into a cabin ten feet by eight and a half, the bedroom, sitting-room, library, study, surgery, menagerie, and general "den" of the ship's doctor, to whom the above invocation was addressed.

"Snake-story!" ejaculated the man of medicine in a tone of cynical disgust, as he sat swinging his legs over the lee-board of his bunk. "What do you want a snake-story for? Isn't the story of a snake enough for you—the natural life-history of any one of them? Why, you might chop out a half-inch slice from this beast anywhere you like 'twixt stem and stern, and find more wonders and marvels in it, and real ones too, than you will get in all the penny-horrible snake-yarns ever invented. But the fact is, people will swallow any amount of nonsense about snake-charming and fights with serpents forty yards long, when they wouldn't believe the extraordinary things that are simply commonplace, everyday facts about them. For instance, take the abnormal distribution of the internal organs, asymmetrical enough almost to shake one's faith in what is regarded as universally characteristic of the vertebrata, that lateral—There, don't howl! I'm not going to lecture! Don't light up till I've stowed these reptiles away, for they can't stand smoke, and then I'll tell you one of the queerest things about serpents that ever came to my knowledge—outside themselves, that is, queer enough to satisfy the fiver there, and true into the bargain.—Get off from the lid of the washstand for a moment, you two, while I check these boxes off with my instruments-case, all snug. Mind none of you come to me to have your teeth out after we leave the Canal; I don't want to find my snake-cage playing Isaac and Joss all over the cabin, if it comes on to blow in the Mediterranean, and she rolls!"

A slender Cingalese rat-snake, which had been nervously twining its sinuous length in and out between the speaker's accustomed hands and around his arms, was allowed to slide back into its prison of mahogany-protected glass and perforated zinc; while the occasional hiss of a couple of sullen rock pythons lying in an open box at his feet was smothered by the interposition of the shutter which secured their traveling-quarters. Possibly we all felt a little more comfortable when they were thus packed up and put to bed, in spite of our confidence in the doctor's assurance that we were in no danger of attack by his weird pets. The medical officer of the Chittagong was, as he himself expressed it, a confirmed ophiomaniac; afflicted with a lunacy for all reptiles and creeping things, but especially "gone" over snakes, which he caught or bought at every practicable opportunity, and fed and fondled till he reached home, where the surplus of his large private museum ashore went in the form of donations or exchanges to every zoological collection in Europe.

The serpents' cages being safely fixed between the shut-up washing-stand and the chest of drawers, and so forming an additional settee, which lightened the cover of the former apparatus of one moiety of its disproportionate burden, half-a-dozen pipes seething their caudal in the already seething atmosphere, unrelieved by the scoop-shaped wind-shoot which angled vainly outside the open scuttle for any stray pulsation of the sultry night. Gold-laced caps were tossed aside and brass buttons loosed as the smokers relaxed their huddled limbs as far as the narrow accommodation would allow, while the doctor extended himself at full length high above us on the grass mat which served him for bed-clothes. And in an endurance of heat and smoke which might have qualified for the Metropolitan Fire Brigade or earned the Victoria Cross, he spun the following:

You can't go in for out-of-the-way kind of "critters" like these all your life without meeting with some adventures more or less strange in connection with them. I have run across a few in my time, as you know by the fang-marks and scars on my arms and neck; but I don't think anything that has ever occurred within my experience of things snakey—and I was born and brought up amongst them and have been in pretty close companionship with them all my days—nothing, I say, that I have known of them in their casual relations with human beings has been more replete with glamour and romance and mysticism than the event I am going to relate. Though I stuck to my original position for all that, remember—that the animals themselves are much more extraordinary in their structure and habits than the theatrical accessories of any drama of mere human interest wherein they have been unwitting actors or passive properties. Just think of the remarkable mechanism of their lower jaw, for example, and their facial bones, undergoing at each meal they make a spontaneous dislocation by virtue of the loose ligamentous attachment—All right, all right; I won't say you don't wish it! Vagabond

never-sating beauties of the bay, the first paragraph which caught my eye as I unfolded the Journal de Commercio was a brief announcement of the death of the savant whom I so desired to meet. He had been bitten, so the account stated, by a curucucu, one of the worst of Brazilian serpents, two days before, and had died in less than an hour, on the very date which the letter in my pocket bore, and at the very spot for which I was then bound.

As soon as I reached Petropolis, I was conducted without delay, by a messenger who had been sent to meet me, to the bedside of the patient, an Englishman, evidently of good position, but personally unknown to me. His friends, it seemed, had become aware that I was expected to come to Rio at the time when the accident happened, and—misled by sundry current fables as to my knowledge of miraculous cures for serpent-bites—had instantly despatched the urgent appeal which I received on my tardy arrival. It is needless to say that the primary issue of the man's life or death was long since decided; the native court had done everything for him that skill and science rendered possible, and all questionable treatment had been at an end for thirty-six hours or more. But he was still very ill, and by no means out of danger of the secondary complications—not seldom fatal in themselves—which may follow a venomous inoculation—shock, gangrene, blood-poisoning, and other disastrous consequences. The bitten hand, the whole arm, and even that side of the chest, were terribly swollen, and the constitutional symptoms severe; but there were certain appearances and phenomena in the case which I could not reconcile with any past experience of these matters, though the Brazilian doctors, not being specialists in this form of injury, had perceived nothing anomalous in them. And so it came about that on my mentioning these discrepancies to the sufferer's charming wife and his father-in-law, which had air of mystery and reserve which manifested itself all through their agonized anxiety was resolved, after a brief consultation between them, by their confiding to me the secret of this hideous affair. No wonder that they were almost beside themselves with grief and horror, and the conscious necessity of suppression and concealment. You have guessed, of course, who the patient was—the newly-made Benedict. As I have intimated, the naturalist had been received by them with open arms, for no suspicion of the emotion entertained by him had crossed their minds. Unaffectedly desirous to repay the recent civilities at Tijuca, they had exerted themselves to the utmost to render his visit a pleasant and memorable one; indeed, so fervid was the warmth of their hospitality that they had even done their best to procure live serpents for him. In this endeavor, however, they had been successful only to a very limited extent, since the slaves who were sent out to scour the forest-clothed hills for bixos brought in but one specimen uninjured among many dead, and that one proved to be of no great scientific interest, though a pretty and harmless little creature, a bright grass-green whip-snake. Its recipient taking it out of the glass jar in which its captors had imprisoned it as coolly and quietly as though it had been a yard of inanimate ribbon exposed to the absence of fangs in its mouth and then proposed that his hostess should herself retain it as a pet, showing her how to handle it so as to avoid exciting its anger. This she accomplished—most women can manipulate a snake far better than a man—to her half-terrified delight; and presently her husband who had been abjectly afraid of the reptile at first, growing bolder by the contagion of her temerity, took it gingerly in his fingers, with the usual result. It bit him with a sharp plunge—only a scratch in the angle between the forefinger and thumb, just enough to draw blood; but he flung the poor whip-snake on the ground in fright and disgust, and began to nurse his hand.

"Do not be alarmed!" said the guest, with a smile; "it is perfectly harmless. The snake's teeth cannot hurt you as much as the beak of yonder love-bird!" Suddenly he seized the bitten hand and bent over it as though to inspect it closely; bent lower and lower, while a stifled silence fell on the group lower and longer till every heart throbbed audibly in the pausing moments. Then he slowly raised his head and lifted up a white ghastly face, the face of one changed by death.

"Senhor," he gasped, with scarce articulate utterance, "I have been deceived! The serpent is venomous, and in an hour you will have succumbed to its life-unless vigorous measures are taken. I have the antidote, a counterpoison proved by a hundred experiments upon myself. Submit yourself to me, and I will save you. Quick! there is no time to be lost. Though you feel nothing now, in a few minutes the poison will have taken possession of your system, and it will be too late. Lie down on the floor of the veranda, instantly—do what I tell you—do nothing else!"

His speech cleared, and the blood flushed back to his lips again as the words poured forth in a mad torrent, and he rushed into the house where his preparations had been deposited. The victim half incredulous, yet scared out of his senses, placed himself in a framework chair and lay back on its fold of jaguar-skin. His wife, with desperate calm, took a flask of Italia from the sideboard and poured its contents into a tall Venetian glass, for she had a dazed remembrance of having read or heard that large quantities of spirit were given to keep up the circulation of people serpent-bitten. She was just on the point of holding the vessel to her husband's lips, when their guest sped back into the veranda with two small boxes in his hand. In a perfect fury of excitement he dashed the glass aside with such violence that it was shattered in his grasp.

"Drink, and you are a dead man!" he shrieked vehemently. "I say, do nothing but what I command, or I am powerless for your rescue. On the floor—quick, quick on the floor, or you are lost!"

Like one possessed he caught the Englishman in his arms and threw him out of the chair upon the boards, while the poor girl, frozen with terror, stood by motionless as a statue, with the broken glass still in her unconscious hand, and her dress stained and splashed by the spirit. Down he knelt by the recumbent form, and drawing forth a lancet from a case of surgical instruments, he lightly scarified the skin of the hand in the neighbourhood of the scarce-visible bite. Then from the other box he took a tiny glass tube, fine almost as a hair, but containing a glistening streak of fluid. Steadying himself by a fierce repressive effort, and evincing a quietude and deliberation as unnatural as his previous frenzy, he gently blew the minute drop of glutinous liquid out of the tube on to the point of the knife, and rubbed it into the bleeding scratches. A moment later his patient uttered a cry of agony, and the operator glanced swiftly upwards for one moment.

In that one moment she learned all. By the lurid flash of that one swift involuntary glance she read revealed in the figure kneeling at her feet her lover and her husband's murderer. Without a word, without a thought, impelled only by a blind protective instinct, she stooped and, with a wild thrust, pushed his head away as he hung over the poisoned hand. Never heading him further as he reeled to his feet and, clapping his throat with both hands, staggered out into the air, she caught up the rapidly discolouring limb and sucked the wound in desperation to drain the veins of the death-already creeping through them. That terrible cry had brought some of the slaves into the veranda, and by this time her father had reached her side. Medical aid was summoned, and stimulants were poured down the sufferer's throat, pending the arrival of the physicians. "Snake-bite!" resounded on every side, and was enough to account for all.

Outside in the glory of the sunshine stood the Portuguese, leaning against a clump of bamboo in the garden, dead. The splintered glass which her hand had mechanically retained had struck him in the neck as she pushed him aside from his lethal work, penetrating his carotid artery, and he had bled to death in a few moments. I suppose some influence in high places and a sufficiency of milreis notes arranged what little was left between him and the concerns of the world. Anyhow, he was huddled into the ground the same night, and next day the Journal de Commercio informed its readers that he had been killed by a curucucu.

Care, skilful surgery, and a grand constitution pulled the patient out of the fire, and he ultimately recovered perfectly as far as his general health was concerned, though he never fully regained the use of his hand and arm. There could be no doubt as to what had happened; but I believe that no one but the wife, her father, and myself ever shared with the victim the true explanation. The Brazilian doctors had naturally accepted without cavil the statement that the hand which by the time they examined it had undergone such disfiguration as to mask any original fang-wounds, had been bitten by a venomous serpent which had escaped unidentified—for the little Philodryas viridissima, the little green whip-snake, had made good its exit in the confusion and was seen no more. The description given of it, however, was unmistakable, and could not possibly be confounded with that of any poisonous snake; it is a species which lives chiefly in trees and bushes, feeding on lizards and leaf-frogs, and is very common in that region. I may add that on more than one subsequent occasion a similar specimen was recognized without a moment's hesitation by all those who had been brought in contact with the reptile in question—a creature absolutely destitute of fangs or poison-bags, and possessing less power of inflicting injury than a mouse. It may be that the whole train of events, seemingly fortuitous, was the result of a careful forethought, and design on the part of the unhappy man. More probably, as it appears to me, he was innocent of any purpose until struck by the diabolical idea that the harmless scratch might be converted into a death-dealing catastrophe by the means which his pursuit of scientific investigations had placed at his disposal—an idea perhaps actually engendered by the fright and unreasoning fears of his wife. But howsoever the horrible intent may have originated, it is certain that the matter contained in the tubule was the venom of one of the great viperine serpents which abound in the tropical parts of South America, most likely a rattlesnake. His collection at Paqueta included a large number of these crotalines, which I believe to be the most virulent serpents on earth; and that he stored the poison for experimental uses was proved by the circumstance that a considerable quantity of it was found amongst his drugs and chemicals in dried scales and on blotting-paper and sugar, as well as in glass tubes. I discovered also a peculiarly shaped spoon, and some shells covered with vegetable parchment which had been prepared to receive the bites of the enraged reptiles, teased into striking, and so to collect the fluid ejected from their glands. And with this deadly virus he was deliberately and murderously infecting the lifeblood of the man whose salt he had eaten/when the love for which his soul was stained betrayed him.

"Bless me, there goes six bells! Why didn't some of you bring me up with a round turn before? We shall have the quartermaster upon us presently to order the light out—Fiver if you mean to keep the middle watch with your eyes open, you'd better turn in for an hour all standing or you'll be found on the wheel-gratings aft dreaming of snake-bites.—I'm going up to sleep on the hurricane-deck skylights.—Good-night, a'!"

THE END.

WHAT UNCLE SAM IS AT.

ITEMS OF INTEREST ABOUT THE BUSY YANKEE.

Polk county, Ia., has paid off all its debt.

There is a white sparrow in Lafayette, Ind.

Wildcats have attacked persons in various parts of Monroe county, Ky., within the last few weeks.

Part of the tombstone over his mother's grave fell on a little child in a Jackson, Tenn., cemetery and broke his leg.

In the Portland district of Michigan fruit growers have found it difficult to get baskets enough in which to ship their large crops of plums this season.

An Iowa husband and wife were admitted to an insane asylum at Mount Pleasant at the same time. It was the first case of the kind in the history of the asylum.

One of the cheerful prevaricators of Danville, Ky., says that a scheme has been proposed there for a cocking main arranged on the plan of the Futurity running race.

During a part of last month the Missouri River was so low at Jefferson City, Mo., that it was said that people might walk across it without wetting their feet.

Two Anarchists under arrest at Portland, Or., so annoyed their cell mates by efforts to propagate their doctrines among them that the other prisoners petitioned the jailor for relief.

Fishers for salmon in the Yaquina Bay, Or., are advised in these days to take whale hooks along, as the cetaceans are so plentiful that it is difficult to get the salmon without encountering them.

In Kentucky the names of persons wanted in court are cried from the front steps of the court houses, and it is said that Kentucky is the only State in the Union where the custom prevails.

With cruel neglect of their own statements the authorities of the Kansas University dismissed all the natural history classes on circus day recently to enable the students to study the animals.

People of South Norridgewock, Me., might be forgiven if they got their dates mixed just now, for in one day there recently a resident picked strawberries, and raspberries, blackberries and blueberries.

Especially good sugar is being manufactured this season from beets at Grand Island, Neb., the beets testing as high as 18 per cent. sugar, according to reports sent out at the close of the first week of manufacturing.

A Lawrence, Kan., man, writing from New York, to the Lawrence Journal, says, "The greatest thing I saw here was a former student of the music department of Kansas University playing a hand organ in Central Park."

Honey dripping down a lightning rod is the latest novelty reported from Independence, Mo. The rod is on the spire of the Court House and passes through a big brass ball into which bees have made their way and where they have hived.

Charity is to profit from profanity in Owingsville, Ky., where a society has been formed whose members, with the intention of checking their profane tendencies, covenant to pay into the treasury five cents for every oath uttered by them.

One man with money enough to buy his mortuary monument ahead of time, who is not ashamed of his vocation is John Hyman of Loogootee, Ind., who has had carved in stone a barrel with a keg on top of it, the barrel inscribed, "A Cooper by Trade."

President Alfred Coolidge of the Second National Bank of Colfax, Wash., has raised an immense quantity of wheat this season and sold it at a rate equalling \$34.20 an acre, while the land itself could not have been sold at any time these past three years at \$10 an acre.

After spending a good deal of time at a fire one evening, the youthful son of a physician of North Yakima, Wash., found himself the next morning almost strangling. Doctors hurriedly called, took from his throat several cinders, and by means of an emetic got some larger cinders out of his stomach.

Bishop Vincent made something of a departure for a Methodist when at the Michigan conference at Kalamazoo, he expressed disapproval of the old-time revival and revival. He also said that he had no sympathy with preachers who couldn't play a game of baseball or ride a bicycle, and added that some Christians thought they were pious when they were only bilious.

The possible benefit of neighborhood gossip has had an illustration in Oregon, where a bit of it which was started in circulation a year ago in June bore welcome fruit last week. S. B. Neil found while ploughing carrots on his land, nine miles from Pendleton, last year, a gold locket which had been used as a watch chain. It contained two locks of hair. He told many people of what he had found. Finally, not many days ago, James Linsey recalled having heard once that a sheepman, James Hackett, had lost such a charm. Hackett was sought out and he recovered the locket which he had lost while rounding up some horses half a dozen years ago. It contained locks of the hair of his two dead children.

A DAY'S VARIANCE IN WEIGHT.

Have you ever tried this experiment of weighing yourself in the morning and again in the evening? It is one of the best ways, so doctors say, of finding whether your health is good or not. If you are thoroughly well there should not be a difference of more than two or three ounces either way in the 12 hours. If you lose or gain as much as eight ounces you should immediately consult a doctor, while the gain or loss of a pound indicates you are on the verge of serious illness.

This, of course, does not apply to one just recovering from illness, for convalescents who have been much reduced may sometimes gain 15 to 20 ounces a day.