



A Letter From India

Ramapatnam, Nellore Dist.
Andhra Pradesh, India
April 26, 1965

Snakes

Among the letters that Dr. Arthur Gordon Boggs received from friends after he retired.

[Note concerning Indian currency: "Rs 2" means 2 rupees.]

Dear Arthur,

I am relying on your knowledge of my integrity in the telling of the happenings of the day. You know how I am always telling you true snake stories! Well here's a TALL one that is TRUE. We heard of snake catchers, so after much planning and calling, they came here. We bargained to pay them Rs 2 per snake. As soon as they arrived they got out their little home-made gourd-like horns and then asked, "Where do we start?" I took them to a banyan tree by the side of my house. They started to play, a weird tune, and within two minutes a big cobra came out to dance. The cobra hunter motioned to me and I called others and watched as

he grabbed that cobra behind the ears, if a snake has ears. Then he carried it to his basket, it smelled some herbs that he had in a small bag and it became drowsy. He then put the mouth to a piece of cloth and it spit out poison. He put it in a basket, alive. (They want them alive, so as to get the poison for serum, and they don't strike them, for that breaks the skin and thus spoils the skin for belts, shoes, bags etc.) They returned to the same tree, each blowing, walking around the tree, and will you believe it, SIX snakes appeared at the same time. Where two were blowing, a cobra each, and next the third, a bundle of wiggling snakes apparently all falling over each other

trying to get out to play--four Russel Vipers. Then, the three with hands full of snakes went to their baskets, made them a bit doped, put them into their baskets. Then to other trees and we followed, and we watched as they caught snake after snake, so that by evening when they stopped, they had caught FORTY-THREE.

I am not sure as to kind, but the deadly poisonous cobra lead all the rest--perhaps thirty were cobras. (Rs 2 per snake isn't much. But 45 per Rs 2 is!)

Now this is the next day and I'll write the second chapter to this incredible story. The men went about this morning and caught eleven more, mostly cobras. That makes FIFTY-FOUR total. At noon, after they had caught FORTY-NINE, we asked them if they would go to the cemetery where folks had said they had seen two cobras. They were willing, in fact they were very gay and light. As we went out my gateway I realized they had been drinking. The one began dancing to his own music. They were very light and loud. At a date palm tree, as one played, out came four more Russell Vipers. The man sorted them, getting heads on one end and tails on the other, and then returned to our place to put them into his basket. The other two, with us all following, went on and into the cemetery.

Soon, out of a bush came a huge big cobra. They got it by the tail, swung it, put it on the ground and played, and what a spread it's hood was, what a sight! Then, as we watched, the one man put his finger into the mouth of the cobra, and it took hold!!! We thought it must be a trick, so we watched, asking, "Is this a trick or is it real??" We were alarmed, but we couldn't find out if he were really bitten or not. (They didn't know Telegu well.) He tried to get the snake loose, pulled, swung the full length cobra from

his finger, finally he pried it loose. The other man, who was even drunker, took the snake to bring back.

He followed the bitten one, as he returned to our place, not sure yet that it was a real drama. But we got more concerned, as he seemed to be in pain, and holding his arm tightly, walked on. Then we ran, Esther Wiebe called to her mother, she ran for serum, and we all went into clumsy action, trying to tie a string around the arm, getting the syringe, etc. By this time, he was on the ground, unconscious, his eyes glassy, rolled far back. We were sure he was dying. The two other men seemed not nearly so concerned; they had their own medicine. They fished around in their bag of herbs and got out what they called pills, and gave them to him. They made him drink awful looking stuff, then stood him up, (he was stiff as a board by then,) and poured buckets of water over him. All the while they said, "Don't worry, it is our responsibility. We have medicine, we know how." Then we decided to take him to Nellore, where they wanted to go. So we put them in the car, he unconscious and they very conscious, together with the still alive FIFTY-FOUR snakes. They took him to government hospital, where he was given more injections. Two days later we had word that they, all three, were seen walking to the R.R. station to get on the train to take their GAIN to Madras. Each had his snakes, each 18, in the basket in a gunny sack, on his back.

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And you may as well believe this story, because it's true.

Florence Rowland