

# India's Fight with Beasts to Save 24,000 Lives a Year

## The Terrible Toll Paid to Jungle Monsters that Menace her Millions like the Plague.

**N**OWHERE on earth is there such a terrible tribute in human life demanded by the beasts and reptiles of the jungle as in India. The figures are appalling.

Every year in that unhappy country about 24,000 persons fall victims to wild animals or deadly snake bites. In 1904—the last year for which statistics have been completed—the number was 24,034.

Of this enormous total, 21,800 were bitten by the cobra or some other of the five species of deadly serpents; 796 were pounced upon and carried away by the dreaded man-eating tiger; 399 were killed by leopards and the remainder fell victims to wild animals of other kinds—perhaps to packs of prowling wolves, to attacks of hungry panthers, or the infuriated rush of the mad elephant.

In all the world serpents claim 30,000 victims a year. Of these it will be seen, then, that India contributes three-fourths as her dreadful toll.

The extraordinary mortality from snakes and wild animals and the heavy loss of property—nearly 100,000 cattle are killed each year—has long been of concern to England, as well as to the Indian Government. Rewards are offered for the destruction of pests and careful experiments have been made in the way of providing antitoxins for snake bites. Still, the death roll is increasing, instead of diminishing, with the years.

**W**ERE disease to sweep away so many people of a country it would be regarded in horror as a plague; men would speak of it with bated breath; thousands would flee before its coming.

In a single province of India, not larger than Maryland, 1000 persons die each year from the bite of the cobra alone. In the same province, some years ago, a single man-eating tigress caused the desertion of thirteen villages and threw fifteen square miles of territory out of cultivation for an entire season.

India's plagues would seem worse than those of ancient Egypt.

There is something narrowly pathetic about the fate of the 21,880 persons—most of them of the poorer class of natives—who give up their lives in writhing, terrible agony as the burning poison from the cobra's fangs riots through their veins.

Even more dramatic is the constant menace of the huge man-eating tiger, which leaps upon its victim like the onrush of a hurricane, slings the unfortunate being over its powerful shoulders and bounds into the jungle, to crush bones and flesh in a satiating meal.

In addition to the nearly 800 persons thus seized and carried away annually by tigers, about 30,000 cattle are charged to their account.

### THREE CLASSES OF TIGERS

By the people of India tigers are divided into three classes—the game killer, the "cattle lifter" and the man-eater.

Of these the game killer is regarded as harmless to man. Indeed, it is in a way beneficial, as it preys upon the deer, pigs and monkeys that, left undisturbed, would play havoc with growing crops. Through the watchfulness and activity of this species of the cat family it is possible for the natives upon the borders of the jungle to receive returns for their labor in the fields.

Next in order comes the "cattle lifter." It is the largest and most powerful of the three, but is not greatly feared by man, except for its depredations upon the herds.

One such tiger will take up its abode near a settlement and live—on its part—on terms of easy friendliness with the natives, seizing as tribute a cow or sheep every few days. If hunted, the tiger will kill animals that it does not need for food, possibly as a warning to be let alone.

Animals of this class have been known to kill eight or ten cattle, one after another, on a single rampage. A seasoned "cattle lifter" confines its attentions to a few villages and kills about seventy domestic animals a year, averaging from \$5 to \$10 each in value.

Man-eaters are thought by some to develop through heredity; others believe they graduate entirely from the ranks of the "cattle lifters." As a rule, these animals are the lazier, fatter and older tigers, who have learned through accident that it is easier to overcome and bear away a human being than a bullock. Usually it is an old tiger whose teeth are no longer good.

Even when huddled in their villages the frightened natives are not safe. Huge man-eaters have been known to bound into the very centre of a group of houses, pick up a man or woman from a doorstep and spring away with its shrieking burden.

It is on record that one tigress in central

India killed 127 persons before she fell under the bullet of an Englishman's rifle. Another carried away 45 men, women and children.

Such tigers are hunted in several ways. One is by driving them out of the tall grass before a line of elephants to an open spot where gunners, also on elephants, are waiting. Native beaters also drive the beasts through the jungle to gunners stationed on platforms built in trees.

By far the most hazardous plan, however, is to pursue the animal on foot. In certain sections of India the authorities pay \$50 for each tiger killed in this way, while only about \$17 is paid for one killed from an elephant or platform.

While 399 persons were killed in India during 1904 by leopards, and 959 by panthers, elephants, wolves, bears and other animals, nothing inspires the terror that a man-eating tiger does.

Every year 90,000 or more domestic animals are slain by wild animals and reptiles in India—in 1904 the number was 98,582. Of these from 16,000 to 20,000 fall victims to snake bites, while tigers, panthers and leopards account for most of the remainder.

Urged by the bounty paid by the government, as well as by the desire for self-preservation, man in turn makes war upon his leaping and crawling enemies. During



the period of the above report, \$36,565 was paid in rewards by the Indian Government for 16,121 wild animals and 65,146 snakes.

Perhaps the destruction of snakes would be far greater were it not for the veneration in

which they are held in most parts of India. In some provinces, in fact, the deadly cobra is pampered, protected and even worshipped.

The five venomous serpents of the country are the hooded cobra, the hamadryad, the krait



796 Persons Carried Away by Ferocious Tigers and Eaters.



21,880 Persons Killed by Snakes in India in one Year.

or karait, the kupper and the chain viper. Most common is the former; it is found almost everywhere. Indeed, snakes have been found at an altitude of 8000 feet in the Himalayas.

During the decade of 1890-90 the number of deaths from snake bites ranged from 15,670 to 23,480 a year. In that time between 212,000 and 578,000 snakes were killed annually—slaughter being spurred by government bounty—with no appreciable diminution of numbers.

Enormous mortality from this source has induced the English and Indian Governments to cast about for some means of relief other than reliance upon slaughter—many natives, believing in the transmigration of souls, will not kill even the most deadly of reptiles.

Experiments have been made in the direction of curing snake bites. One method proposed is the injection of a specially prepared anti-venom, which acts as an antitoxin. Another consists of treating the wound with permanganate of potash.

These methods, especially the latter, have been found to result in gratifying success in the case of animals bitten, but their value in saving human lives is still more or less problematical.

It is intended, however, to keep supplies of permanganate of potash in every village and station, in shape for immediate use.

Serpents are at once the nuisance and the

terror of visitors or temporary residents in India. A traveler related recently his experience on Borong Island, "the paradise of snakes," where so many of all kinds are found that it is a common saying that they go to Borong from all the world after death.

When he sat down to supper he noticed his companions—also Europeans—looking steadily at the thatched roof. Suddenly one exclaimed, "There's a snake!" and, snatching up a long sword, he made a stab at the ceiling and brought down the neatly divided body of a cobra.

Upon another occasion, while visiting a neighbor, he saw a snake drop from the roof upon the shoulders of a companion. The latter, accustomed to the ways of serpents, sat perfectly still, not moving a muscle, while the baneful head of the snake swayed, hissing, about his neck.

The host picked up a sword to kill the reptile, but his nerve failed. All sat, staring in fascinated horror, until a head servant came into the room. He caught up the sword and with a swift, deft stroke, severed the creature's head.

It is commonly said, and firmly believed, in some parts of India, that if a man will stand steadily gazing into the glittering eyes of a karait for a few minutes, he will go stark, raving mad.

Not a pleasant land in which to live, truly! Yet the extent to which serpent worship exists among vast numbers of the natives is astonishing.

In the one district of Travancore there are no fewer than 10,000 to 20,000 shrines dedicated exclusively to the propitiatory worship of snakes. Neighboring families make periodical offerings of dough, milk and cooked rice to the serpentine habitues of these shrines; they burn lights and sing hymns in order to be assured of the favor of the reptilian deities.

### GREAT SNAKE FESTIVALS

At certain periods of the year snake festivals are held, when people gather from all parts to worship and bring gifts, often costly. It is believed that in the vicinity of the shrines snake bites never prove fatal.

It is stated as a remarkable fact that in the Travancore territory the number of deaths from snake bites is comparatively small. A partial explanation of this may be found in the extreme kindness with which the people treat the serpents. As a rule, Indian snakes are not aggressive. If left severely alone they will rarely harm a person.

Think of two-thirds of all victims of venomous reptiles being from one land! India's burden is truly great.

There are no complete statistics to show how many persons die in the world of snake bites each year. The number, however, has been placed at 30,000. In the United States, so far as known, the annual fatalities amount to about fifty. Florida is generally looked upon to contribute several of these with regularity.

Venomous snakes of America are comprised in four families—the rattlesnake proper, the copperhead and the moccasin, the coral snake and the ground rattler. There are several varieties of the rattlesnake and two of the coral. Most deadly of all are the copperhead and the diamond rattler.

In Africa—North and South—the most dangerous serpents are the African cobra, the spitting snake and the sheep stinger. Australia has about twenty poisonous varieties, five of them extremely venomous. Among these are the brown-banded snake, the brownsnake and the blacksnake.

A number of deaths result in France every year from snake bites. A premium of 25 centimes is paid for each venomous serpent killed there. In 1890, 67,620 snakes were killed, and each year since has seen a great many put out of business, but the supply appears undiminished.