

A HOLIDAY IN THE SUNDERBUNDS

By
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*OF THE HOOGLY RIVER
SURVEY, CALCUTTA*

ILLUSTRATED BY
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The Sunderbunds are a vast network of islands and creeks at the head of the Bay of Bengal, the haunt of crocodiles, tigers, and deer. The Author went there in the hope of bagging a Royal Bengal tiger, and after a very exciting time succeeded in his

quest. Our readers will be interested in his account of the extraordinary "snake people"—a primitive tribe who make a livelihood by capturing snakes, and allow deadly cobras and hamadryads to bite them with apparent immunity.

A SHORT period of leave being due to me, I decided to charter a suitable boat and pay a visit to the famous Sunderbunds, at the head of the Bay of Bengal. My chief object was to bag a Royal Bengal tiger—a long cherished ambition fostered by occasional meetings with these superb animals at times when I either had no weapon with me or the short glimpse I obtained of the tiger gave me no time for a shot.

Behold then, one brilliant day, a scarlet painted boat dropping down the Hooghly on the ebb tide, with just sufficient wind behind her to keep the sail bellied. The interior of the craft was packed with a miscellaneous agglomeration of tinned provisions, fresh vegetables, earthenware jars full of water, bedding, gun-boxes, a camera, a couple of boxes, and—stowed under the bow-sheets—about two hundredweights of coal. At the helm a figure—myself—smoking contentedly, while in various parts of the boat squatted the crew, consisting of three men and a youth to do the scullion's work.

I did not get very far the first day, owing to the wind changing its direction, but within the next two days I had penetrated a fair way into the Sunderbunds, though not without incident. To commence with, my patent oil "cooker" obstinately refused to function, notwithstanding much coaxing and not a little vituperation. As a final unanswerable retort to my persuasions the two lamps both caught fire, and blazed furiously, reducing themselves within a few minutes to objects fit only for the scrap-heap! Recognizing defeat, I hurled the wretched contraption under the stern-sheets, where it reposed in a state of sullen rustiness till I returned to Calcutta again. After this little incident we had to resort to the coal, which proved such

an offensive medium of cooking that it was flung overboard. Subsequently, when we required fuel, we went ashore and gathered dry wood, which, though it smoked terribly at times, was satisfactory on the whole.

There is a fair variety of feathered game in Bengal, and among the low-lying islands of the Sunderbunds one finds curlew, plover of many types, snipe, and a multitude of duck and geese, so that I was able to keep an excellent table. We had our first taste of venison about the fifth day, when, going ashore on a partially-cultivated island, I saw a small herd of cheetal—the only species of deer found hereabouts—and bagged two fine buck.

The flesh of the cheetal is scarcely good eating, being very coarse, but this is hardly surprising, as there is precious little for them to eat. Grass is very scarce, only existing in scattered patches along the banks of creeks and on clearings in the jungle. These clearings are the exception rather than the rule in the western part of the Sunderbunds, as the islands are thickly covered with dense jungle which grows right down to the water-edge. As far as I can make out, the deer live on salt-impregnated mud and an occasional mouthful of coarse grass. Indeed, it surprises me how they manage to exist at all, as the jungles are infested with tigers and the rivers with immense crocodiles whose sole occupation in life, while waiting for their victims, appears to be basking on some low-lying bank and assuming the appearance of dead tree-trunks. Between these two depredators, the cheetal, one would imagine, must have an exceptionally "thin" time, yet they seem to thrive and increase.

Pleased with my bag, I decided to move further eastward and get among the less-cultivated islands, as the game is more

plentiful there. Accordingly I set sail again and pottered about among the islands, occasionally shooting at crocodile and often spotting herds of cheetal grazing by the water. Considering the number of deer one sees in the Sunderbunds, the male of the species is surprisingly scarce. They are very seldom seen with a herd of does, apparently preferring to wander and graze alone.

Still in search of my tiger, I cruised about among the hundreds of creeks and islands that go to make up the great area known as the Sunderbunds. One day, while sailing down a creek, I fell in with a unique tribe of natives. These remarkable people live, not in huts, but in curious house-boats which they build themselves. The boats are wonderful affairs—regular floating homes, perfectly snug and water-tight, having fixed to them in all sorts of quaint places such things as fowl-coops, water jars, vegetable baskets, etc., all most ingeniously contrived.

THE SNAKE PEOPLE.

The most extraordinary thing about this tribe, however, is their manner of livelihood, for they exist solely by means of catching snakes, which they sell to private collectors and the Zoological Gardens in Calcutta. By snakes I do not mean harmless grass snakes and the like; on the contrary, their choice

is in the direction of the venomous and deadly cobra, the dread hamadryad, and the great python. I have seen these amazing people approach a deadly "spectacled" cobra and catch it with their bare hands with the ease and dexterity of a man picking up a piece of rope! They usually carry with them a long polished bamboo of fine balance and weight, having at its end a blunt, two-pronged fork, and also another bamboo with a sharp spear-head, but not once during the couple of days I watched them did the hunters have occasion to use these implements.

They appeared to possess an uncanny ability for locating the whereabouts of snakes. I went ashore with them on two occasions, and was astonished at their knowledge of snakes and their habits, and the ease with which they found their quarry. A casual glance about the ground, and a clue was immediately obtained. Then out came a sort of reed pipe, on which the hunter played weird music, and the next thing I saw was a cobra emerging from a hole or under a bush, head up and hood flattened, swaying from side to side in time with the music.

Faster and faster became the rhythm of the music and faster the swaying of the deadly reptile in front, till the tune rose to a frenzied and piercing crescendo, breaking off in the middle of an incredibly high note. Then



One of the quaint house-boat homes of the snake-catchers of the Sunderbunds.



A snake-catcher with a big python the Author saw him catch with his bare hands.

there would be dead silence for the space of a second, and the next thing I saw was a brown hand shooting out and gripping the snake just below its hood, while its length writhed round the brown arm, seeking to crush it by constriction. But all to no purpose, for suddenly it would be scientifically loosed from the arm and popped into a basket, while the catcher calmly proceeded to light a "*beedi*" (native cigarette).

The poison is apparently *not* extracted from the fangs of the snakes by these strange people—at least, so they told me. In view of that statement you can imagine my horror a little later on to see one of the women teasing a great eight-foot cobra, freshly caught, and not even wincing when the hideous thing struck at and bit her on the cheek-bone! Indeed, she laughed and continued her teasing, what time my mind was reeling with horror, for I expected at any moment to see the poor woman fall back and expire. A man, however—the kindly-looking old chap seen in one of the photographs—seeing the anxious expression on my face, explained that the members of the tribe were immune to snake poison, and showed me bits of dry sticks and herbs which are supposed to be wonderful antidotes. All the same, my fears were not allayed for some hours.

One of the photographs shows the man referred to with a great python which I saw him catch, and another a woman toying with a deadly cobra, fresh from the jungle.

I spent two fascinating days with these weird "snake-people" before I moved on

again, landing here and there to bag a deer or to locate a good place for tiger. One day, going ashore on an island where clearing operations had been started, I discovered abundant evidence of "Stripes." The interior of the island had been denuded of trees, and contained two frail mud and bamboo huts wherein dwelt four natives—the entire population—with a few goats, a cow or two, and the inevitable pariah dogs.

NEWS OF TIGERS.

The huts stood by a creek about thirty feet wide; on the other side was an immense belt of virgin jungle. To the left was a bare space destitute of so much as a blade of grass and into this bare patch extended a tongue of jungle from which, it was evident, tigers came and went frequently. Greatly pleased with the appearance of the surroundings, I questioned one of the natives about the tigers. He promptly commenced a long tale of woe. The great animals, he said—there were two of them—prowled round the huts every night, terrifying the men with their roaring and even sniffing at the frail walls. The little stock of domestic animals was rapidly being depleted; and one of the men had actually been pounced on by a tiger while fishing in the creek. He had only been saved by his comrades, who, hearing his frantic shouts rushed out with tins and sticks, which they beat loudly.

Taken aback by the alarming noise, Mr. Stripes left his intended meal and retreated into the jungle with much snarling and

growling. If I only sat up one night, concluded my informant, I could rid the settlers of their unwelcome neighbours and they would pray for my everlasting prosperity. He and his friends would willingly help the Sahib to build a *machan* or dig a pit—indeed, they would do anything so long as the Protector of the Poor killed the tigers.

I did not need much coaxing to sit up, for I felt tremendously excited. Accordingly I hunted round and finally selected a position on the *bund* (a broad rampart-like wall of earth which protected the interior of the island from floods) as a good point at which to await the coming of the tiger. Hollowing out part of the bank, I stuck a few twigs in front by way of camouflage, and then asked the natives to sell me a goat for bait. They were unwilling to part with a goat, but were quite prepared to let me have an old dog and, as nothing better offered, I took it. That night at seven o'clock I proceeded with two of my men to the spot selected, tied the dog to a stake some twenty feet in front of me, and sat down behind the twigs to await whatever the night should bring forth.

At first the dog kept quiet, but after about fifteen minutes it began to bark persistently with great vigour. "That noise," I thought, "should attract any animal on the look-out for a meal," and I sat up on the alert, eyes straining at every bush and tree in the field of view. It was the night of full moon, and everything in the vicinity showed up well; most of the tree-stumps appeared to be animals crouching in divers strange positions.

Very soon we were tormented by mosquitoes, those voracious pests of swampy ground. Ye gods! what monsters these were! They bit us on every exposed part of our anatomies till I well nigh decided to abandon my enterprise, even if a dozen tigers came and lined themselves up for slaughter. Fortunately for me, however, I sat still.

Presently I noticed a new note in the dog's bark. Fear! Abject and awful fear! Pity tore at my heart, as I sat with muscles tensed and nerves quivering, watching the poor animal. Had I not known that a tiger was probably within leaping distance I should have released the dog. But it was too late.

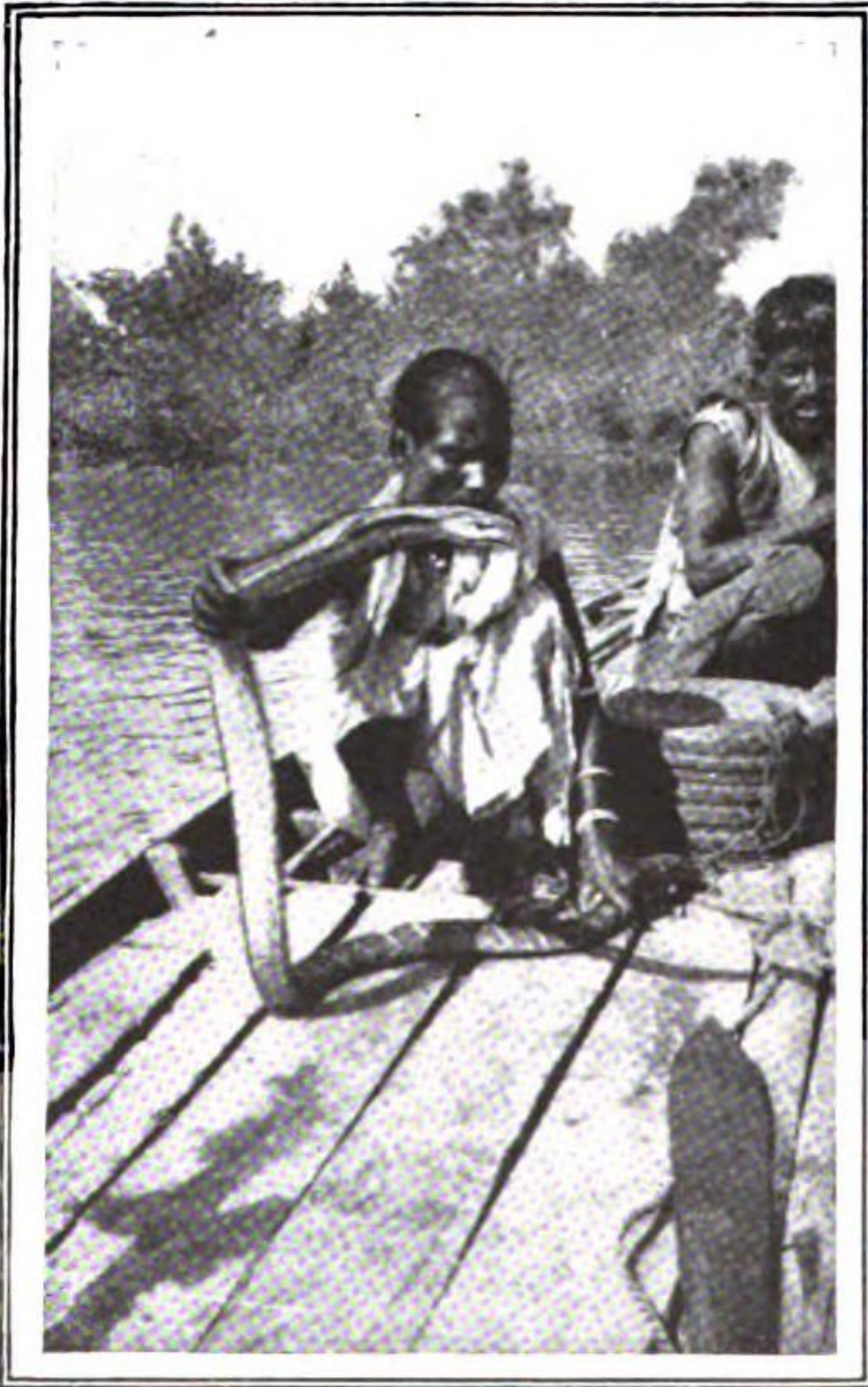
Even as it grovelled on the mud, in a perfect frenzy of terror, my servant, Ali, who was sitting slightly behind me to the right, pointed to the left of the dog and whispered, "*Bagh!* (tiger!)" Straining my eyes in the direction indicated, I beheld something white near a low bush, and a few seconds later a reddish mass took shape behind it, where stood a magnificent tiger—not fifty feet from me, as I subsequently discovered, though at the time the deceptive moonlight made it appear at least a couple of hundred yards away.

This illusion caused me to remain still, for I thought: "It is no use firing, in this uncertain light, at anything an unknown distance away." Moreover, the tiger, seeing the dog could not escape, would probably approach it slowly and so give me an easy shot. For quite

five minutes the tiger stood still as a carved image, staring at the dog or us—I do not know which, for the dog was directly between us and the beast and we were perfectly visible.

I had just begun to wonder if I should not risk a long shot when, almost before the thought had formulated itself in my mind, there was a flash of what appeared to be a body of brown-coloured light and the tiger was on the dog, killing it instantly.

Heavens! what incredible speed! Never have I pictured anything like it! Just as a thunderbolt speeds on its way so did that tiger hurtle through the air. Scarce had my mind adjusted itself to this situation when my rifle spoke, and so close had the tiger and dog rolled that the tongue of flame from my rifle-muzzle nearly reached them. There was a hideous snarling roar, and the tiger leapt



A woman toying with an eight-foot cobra, freshly caught in the jungle. She even allowed it to bite her without apparent ill-effects!



"There was a flash and the tiger was on the dog, killing it instantly."

fully six feet into the air. Before it landed again two loud reports nearly shattered my ear-drum. Ali had emptied both barrels of my 12-bore, but without effect, for the tiger, reaching the ground, immediately bounded off into the jungle, giving me a flying shot which did not prove true.

There was dead silence for about two minutes, while nerves strained to breaking-pitch relaxed, and we began to breathe freely again. For only then did I realize what a foolhardy thing I had done in sitting on the ground for a tiger. Never again, after that exhibition of sheer electric speed!

I sat on for about fifteen minutes, alternately exultant and depressed, for though I knew I had hit the animal, I was not very hopeful that it was in a vital spot. Indeed, I had not the vaguest idea *where* the beast could have been hit. At length, deciding that there was nothing more to be done—it would have been sheer lunacy to attempt to track the animal by night—I started back to the boat with my faithful henchman, discussing the possibilities of getting the tiger on the morrow.

VICTORY.

At long last day dawned, and routing out the four native settlers, who were all agog to hear what had happened, I set off to the scene of the night's adventure. Casting about, I saw one or two drops of blood scattered here and there and my spirits sank to zero, for I reasoned that if the animal had been badly hit there would have been an abundance of blood. Gloomy of brow and heavy at heart I was scanning the ground where the faint blood-trace vanished altogether when a prodigious roar electrified me. Looking up, I beheld the tiger not seventy yards away, growling menacingly!

Throwing my rifle to my shoulder I fired

my double-barrel and approached cautiously, keeping a wary eye on her slightest movement. When about thirty yards off, noticing her preparing for a leap, I gave her the contents of both barrels, one behind the shoulder and the other in the chest. She rolled over, but it took another shot to finish her off.

And now, approaching and standing over her, I exulted. I called triumphantly to the men, and very timidly they approached, ready to take to their heels at the twitch of a whisker.

Hauling the tiger into the open, I proceeded to examine her. I now discovered that my shot of the previous night had hit her in the right shoulder. The heavy .430 Mauser bullet had broken the shoulder, travelled right through the body, and emerged inside the left flank. In spite of this, the beast had leapt into the jungle, lain there throughout the bitterly cold night, and yet in the morning was possessed of sufficient strength to attempt a charge, to run away, and to sustain three heavy bullets before receiving her quietus. Truly a wonderful vitality!

After taking some photographs, I got the men to carry the animal to the boat, which they did amid much clamour and merriment, for they were now rid of one cruel enemy.

Reaching the boat, we got the animal on board and, after distributing largesse to the jubilant natives, hoisted our sail and sped down the creek, followed by the benedictions of the four settlers.

Everything was literally plain sailing till we got half way to Diamond Harbour and then the wind, fickle as ever, died away utterly. Nothing daunted, the three men and I pulled at the oars for twenty-two miles, finally reaching the harbour utterly exhausted.

Having presented the animal for inspection before the district magistrate, I sent it to the taxidermist's and then, looking longingly back down the river whence I had just come, I stepped aboard the boat once more. Heaving a mighty sigh of mingled happiness and regret I set sail for Calcutta and work, having spent a thoroughly enjoyable holiday in the wilds and achieved my greatest ambition.



The Author with the tiger he shot. In rear are two of his men and the four inhabitants of the island.

just as the animal made a run for the jungle. The hasty shot took her—she later proved to be a tigress—in the middle of her off fore-paw. She stopped, turned round, and made as if to charge us but, thinking better of it, finally dodged behind a bush and lay down. Suspecting a ruse on her part to get us within easy springing distance, I hesitated as to what course to adopt. Finally, I took