

A KING-RATTLER FIGHT.

A PLAINSMAN'S STORY OF A SNAKE DUEL TO THE DEATH.

How the little King, which has no Poison Sac, encircled about a Rattler, dodging blows—a Spring and the Rattler was Choked Dead.

The king snake is a bright green little fellow no thicker than a walking stick and vanishes at one's approach with every manifestation of fear, although in many other ways he shows a courage and daring out of all proportion to his size. His home is on the prairies of the vast Southwest, where the sickening burr-r-r-r of the rattlesnake's grim warning is heard more often than human sounds. Virtually he is the knight errant of snakehood, for valorous achievement is his dominant ambition and his days are spent in conquest for conquest's sake. He has apparently set for himself the monumental task of wiping out the entire tribe of rattlesnakes, against which he wages desperate and uninterrupted war and is the most unrelenting, most dangerous and most feared of all the latter's many foes. Just why he should single out the rattler as his pet aversion (instances of his attacks upon other snakes are rare) is a mystery. He is too reticent by habit to let the herpetologist into the secret.

The largest king snakes seldom exceed a length of three feet. The average size is between two and two and a half feet. Unhesitatingly, the king will provoke a fight with a rattler ten times its weight and leave him dead on the field of battle. Although plainmen often come across a vanquished rattler in his death agonies and see the little green champion gliding away in the prairie grass, it is seldom indeed that the actual engagement is viewed. But among the few who have been so fortunate as to witness one of the king snake's battles is John L. McAfee of Texas who told of it a few nights ago at an up-town hotel.

"It took place near Clarendon, Tex.," said Mr. McAfee, "at the close of one sweltering day in the hot season. I had been exercising a vicious young broncho, which managed to unseat me and break for home, leaving me some miles from town to trudge back on foot. This was not a matter of great difficulty, as recent fires had singed the prairie, and in many places the grass (ordinarily a great impediment to walking) was burned to the roots. It was in one of those burned places that I stumbled across a diminutive king snake and a big rattler in a duel. It had evidently just begun, for they were manoeuvring for advantageous positions, according to their distance and separate methods of defence and attack. So engrossed were they by their efforts to secure superior ground that my soft approach was unheeded, and I was permitted to observe the incidents of their combat from a distance without either of the participants showing the slightest interest in the presence of the onlooker.

"As I found them the rattler was striving for a position in the very centre of the space, which he soon attained and where he coiled to strike. His tail was thrashing the air and his rattles were clacking. The king snake was moving leisurely around him in a great circle, pausing occasionally to raise his head from the ground, as if to hurl back defiance at his enemy. His challenge was accepted readily by the rattler, who at each repetition unwound himself in the twinkling of an eye, to coil again within reach of the intrepid little monarch, at whom he struck viciously, but without avail. The latter's manner of dodging was marvellous. Just as it looked as if it was all over with the little fellow he was ten feet away, although still spinning in his orbit round the enraged and befuddled rattler. The escape of his intended victim seemed to puzzle the rattler, but he gave no advantage in consequence. Each time he struck he instantly recoiled and assumed an attitude of defence. His eyes followed the path of the king snake, who continued to move in a semi-indolent fashion, stopping now and then to send forth that silent taunt, insult, or whatever it was, which never failed to throw the rattler into a violent passion and spur him to action.

"These tactics the little fellow used to harass his antagonist for fully ten minutes, and in that time the rattler struck at him no less than twenty times without so much as grazing him, the cunning little tantalizer invariably making good his escape before the fangs were half way on their death dealing mission. Nor did he deviate the breath of his hand from his established circle, the diameter of which was probably less than fifteen feet. Even when the astute rattler endeavored to intercept him at various places he was not swerved an inch from his course. To all intent he was following a recognized precept of king-snake warfare, and he didn't intend to let the enemy force him from his position.

"In the beginning the rattler aimed at the slender head of the king snake, but eventually, as his failures to wound the wily fellow became more and more pronounced. He began to strike at random, trusting to settle him by a chance blow. To all appearances he was dazed and bewildered by the king snake's successful evasion. His rage, too, became wilder. He completely lost his head, often striking out after the king snake had passed him.

"By and by the great expenditure of force began to tell on the rattler. Apparently appreciating the fact and the necessity for recuperation, he ceased to follow his tormentor and withdrew to his first position within the centre of the space. Here he coiled and laid his head upon his folds. The king snake appeared to be as fresh and vigorous as ever. He now began to spurt, and at the same time diminished the circle's diameter slightly. Otherwise he gave no indication of a change in tactics. Two minutes passed. The rattler remained passive and lethargic and offered no offence. The king snake infused a little more speed into his movements, but the aspect of the contest was now peaceful.

"Two more minutes wrought a decided change. The little fellow again decreased the circle, humped himself, and began to 'scorch' like a professional bicycle rider. Faster and faster he glided around his big foe, who was now aroused from his temporary coma, and displayed unmistakable signs of terror. He raised his head high in the air and allowed it to revolve as if on an axis inclined to the plane of the king snake's orbit. A shiver shot through his coils. Momentarily his courage had departed.

"Nearer and nearer whizzed the little green monarch, now going at express train speed, the circle he described was marked by an unbroken band of green against the blackened stubble of the burnt grass. Made drunk, it seemed, by the dizzy revolutions of the king snake, the rattler's head swayed round and round until it looked as if it would snap and fall from the sinuous mottled neck. It was the most exciting scene I had ever witnessed.

"How long the little fellow continued to fly around the big rattler at this wonderful pace I cannot say. Possibly not more than a minute or two, yet it seemed to me, and no doubt the rattler was likewise so impressed, that he was at it for half an hour. But finally the movement of the rattler's head became slower, more rhythmic. He seemed fascinated or hypnotized by the accelerated action of his determined antagonist, and more shivers agitated his coils. Meantime the little fellow kept decreasing the circle until he was within three feet of the rattler, and then he played his trump card—that is, he came to a standstill with such electrical abruptness that it gave even me a start of surprise. This unexpected move totally paralyzed the rattler. His head sunk limp and inert upon his stiffened coils and he remained motionless. But presently his faculties seemed to revive; a thrill swept from his head to his tail and caused his rattles to rustle feebly. Again he raised his head and extended his neck as if ready to strike. It was his last act of aggression, and fatal were the results, for there was a sudden flash of green and both reptiles seemed merged in one common writhing body. A cloud of dust obscured them for a moment but as it blew away I saw the little king snake firmly coiled around the neck of the big rattler, whose struggles and contortions were growing less and less effective.

"I took out my watch and counted the minutes. Before five had expired the big rattler had ceased to move. Five minutes more and I was satisfied that he was dead, and so moved up to get a closer view. To my amazement the king snake never stirred as I bent over him. I waited five minutes to see what move he would make of

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his own volition, but as he still clung to the dead rattler I stooped down, and began to unwind him. This he allowed me to do without a resisting struggle, and even after I had stretched him on the ground to take his measure he made no effort to get away. In fact he was too much overcome by his exertions to be capable of motion for the time being, and was almost as devoid of life as his vanquished foe.

"This little champion measured about two feet ten inches. The rattler, which I carried to Clarendon, was within two inches of six feet and had fourteen rattles and a button. In weight he was probably nine times superior to his slayer. Close inspection showed how terrible had been the strangulation to which he had succumbed, for his neck around which the king snake had riveted his coils, was as corrugated or 'threaded' as a gigantic screw.

"When the little king snake had revied, which did not occur until a good quarter of an hour had passed, he crawled slowly away and vanished in the grass without so much as a backward glance at the corpse of his victim. I had no hesitation in picking him up from the carcass of the rattler," concluded Mr. McAfee, "as the king snake is harmless to man and has no venom sac. He enjoys the constant protection of all plainmen, who are well acquainted with his hatred of the rattlesnake, and to kill one is to meet with the opprobrium of all who roam the prairie lands."

NOT TOO OLD TO WHEEL.

Mrs. Bradish Found That Her Husband Had been Influenced.

"It isn't much use for anybody to go down to Niece Annie and expect to hear talk of anything but 'wheels', as they call them," said Mrs. Bradish in an aggrieved tone, as she entered the sitting-room where her husband sat close to the Franklin stove.

"That's so; that's the very thing I've been saying to you for a long time," said Mr. Bradish, with a nod, as he moved along to share the warmth with the partner of his joys. "They can turn any subject round to bicycles before you can wink."

"I should think they could!" preceeded his wife, irritably. "When I told them about my new receipt for spice cookies, all they said was, 'Those would be just the thing to take for luncheon when we go off on our wheels!' When I mentioned being glad spring had come, they said, 'Yes, indeed! The roads will be in splendid condition for wheeling now in a couple of weeks.'"

"When I asked Ned if he'd read about that dreadful railroad accident," he said, "Yes, auntie, I did. There's no use. I believe I'd rather trust to my wheel than a railroad corporation any day, no matter how long or rough the journey is. I believe statistics ten years from now will show—"

"Then I asked Annie if she'd heard about Mary Ellen's having slow fever, and she said, 'Yes, and she never would have had it if Uncle Will had bought her a wheel last summer when we had ours. It's lack of exercise all through the fall that ran her down. Why, the physicians all say that a wheel—and so she went on, till at last I gave up and came home.

"How in the world you can stand it to go down there so often as you do, James, is beyond me," continued Mrs. Bradish, with energy, as she turned towards her husband.

Suddenly a strange idea dawned upon her. James Bradish, she demanded, "you don't mean to tell me they've talked you into—that you've any thoughts of—do you realize how old you are?"

"I'm only sixty-nine, Martha," returned her husband, with a mixture of dignity and triumph, while a youthful gleam lighted his faded eyes. And Mrs. Bradish knew that her words had come too late.

The Yeast Bell.

"My oldest daughter," said Mr. Glimmerton, "is forever saying funny things. I don't mean the funniest things in the world, but just cheerful, breezy, bright things, that make us laugh. Here, for instance, is the oldest son leaving word when he goes to bed that he wants to be called in the morning at 7.30 the oldest daughter appears ringing a bell.

"What's that mean?" I ask, and my oldest daughter says:

"That's the yeast bell."

"The yeast bell?"

"Yes. The rising bell," she says.

"Then we all laugh, and say we must tell Claude, and when Claude comes out we tell him and he laughs, and we sit down to breakfast in a cheerful, jolly mood.

"She's always saying things like that, my oldest daughter; she keeps us in perpetual good humor."

A Little Wild Apple-Tree.

There's a little wild apple-tree out in the pasture, Crooked, and stunted, and queer in its shape, and it waves its long arms as the summer winds sweep it.

As it were trying its best to escape.

I have never found fruit on its gnarled, twisted branches; Green moss clothes its trunk from its boughs to its feet; But its blossoms each spring with the best of the orchard, And oh, but its delicate blossoms are sweet!

On the north, by the orchard the pasture is bounded. There decorous apple-trees stand in straight rows. You can see that each tree has been carefully planted, And feels it must carefully heed how it grows.

But 'tis the wild tree that the "high-hole" has chosen; She found such a beautiful place for her nest. The orchard is pleasant; I highly respect it, But the little wild apple-tree 'tis I love best!

—Margaret Vandegrift.

WISE OLD CROWS.

How They Solved the Clam-Opening Problem and Administered Justice.

Few pastimes are more interesting and instructive to a person living in the country than observation of the habits and peculiarities of the common birds and animals which he sees. You may read the observations of others with a great deal of pleasure, but here is a singular fascination in becoming a discoverer on your own account.

Of all the birds that I have watched I think none has repaid me more richly than that amusing old reprobate, the crow. His sagacity is notorious, and from some things that I have myself observed it would almost seem as if he must be endowed with something nearly akin to reason.

On one occasion, while I was living in New Jersey, near Long Branch, I was one day attracted by the loud and excited cawing of a number of crows down on the shore of the Navesink River, which ran only a few yards from my door. Curious to know what all the excitement was about, I seated myself at a window to watch them.

It was just after the equinoctial storm in September, and I soon found that they were disputing about the best way to deal with some soft-shelled clams which had been washed up from a sandy shoal.

These clams, of which crows are very fond, are oblong in shape, about four or five inches long and two wide, with a shell not much thicker than a mussel, but still too hard for a crow to break with its beak. From one end of the shell protrudes a long neck, sometimes more than half as long as your finger, through which the clam sucks its food.

For half an hour or more the crows argued noisily; then the dispute subsided, and it was evident that they had arrived at some decision which they were about to put to the test. Almost immediately one crow, which had been particularly noisy in the discussion, picked up a clam by its long neck, and flying up in the air some distance let it drop. When it struck on the stony shore all the crows, about fifteen or twenty in number, flew to learn the result of the experiment.

That it proved the soundness of their reasoning was evident, for each crow at once possessed himself of a clam, flew up into the air with it, let it drop on the stones to break its shell, and then ate its contents with great apparent satisfaction. This they continued until they had eaten as many as they wanted, and then they flew away.

At another time I saw something which convinced me that they have some sort of government among themselves, and that an infringement of their laws is followed by punishment. This happened in Virginia, which, by the way, is a perfect paradise for crows, with its immense corn and peanut fields. I was sitting at an upper window one quiet Sunday afternoon, looking across a broad field toward the James River, there about seven yards wide. The field had been newly ploughed and harrowed, ready for planting, and was perfectly level and smooth so that any object could be distinctly seen upon the ground at a distance of three or four hundred yards. As I was looking, I saw a crow alight about 200 yards away. Soon two more came from the same direction and alighted near the first one. Crows continued to arrive, sometimes singly and sometimes by twos and threes, until there must have been about fifty, or perhaps more. All came from the same direction and took ground on a space perhaps fifty or sixty feet square.

They were very quiet, which is unusual where many of them are together, and it was evident that they had met for a purpose. Presently one flew up in the air some little distance, appeared to be looking for something, and then returned. This was repeated several times, at short intervals, before three crows appeared flying very low, at the sight of which the assembled crows manifested considerable excitement, though they made very little noise. The three were flying in a line, one behind the other; the middle one, a dejected-looking bird, was unmistakably guarded by the others. They alighted a few yards from the others, and the prisoner for such he evidently was, sat with drooping wings and head, and still guarded.

Then began a great noise. Each crow seemed to be trying to outtalk every other. This continued for about ten minutes, I should think, when, with one accord, they pitched on the unfortunate prisoner and pecked him to death, after which they dispersed as quietly as they had come.

I afterward went out, viewed the remains, and wasted considerable time in vain speculations as to the offence which the unfortunate bird could have committed against the laws of crowdom, and what would have been the result if the jury had disagreed.—Youth's Companion.

The Midnight Hint.

"Yes," remarked young Borem, "it is undoubtedly true that every dog has his day."

"Perhaps so," replied Miss Cutting, glancing at the clock and suppressing a yawn, "but he doesn't sit up all night waiting for it."

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Emperor William of Germany has directed all state and military officials to hold themselves in constant readiness to go to Friedrichruhe the moment the news of Bismarck's death may be received. The mission of these functionaries is to place the seal of the empire on all the Prince's papers before any have been removed. His majesty is said to fear certain revelations.

Enough and More.

Tourist—Is there much corn raised in Kentucky?

Native—Oh, yes; lots of it.

Tourist—What is the average annual crop?

Native—Can't say exactly, but it's large enough to make all the whiskey we can use besides all that's wasted for bread.

A Dry Dock.

"George, why do you call the Rev. Dr. Whitehead by such a coarse and familiar title?"

"What did I call him?"

"You called him 'Doc.'"

"Well he is a kind of 'Doc,' isn't he?"

"What kind?"

"Dry."

Total Darkness Not Wanted.

Mrs. Burleigh—How is it that your daughter never seems to have any steady company? Dear me! I wish it was that way with my Beatrice.

Mrs. Sharpson—the mystery is easily explained. We use electricity in our house. You know you can't turn that down without extinguishing it.

Confident.

"Did I understand you to say that you have \$10,000,000 at your disposal?" asked the capitalist.

"Yes," replied the member of the Spanish cabinet. "Of course, that was an approximate statement."

"Can't you figure it exactly?"

"Well—we're dead sure of the last seven figures."

Would Exercise his Talent.

Burglar Bill (to his new cellmate)—So you're a musician, are ye, an' got sent here fer stealin' a pianny? Well, ye won't do much musical practisin' in his place, I'll bet.

Newcomer—Oh, I don't know. If I get hold of a file I'll probably try a few bars."

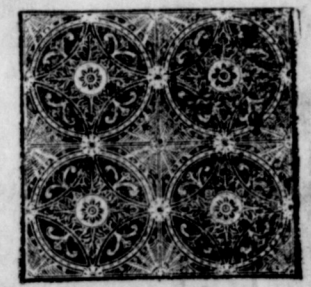
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