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10th October 2001

Mr. Mike Levine,
13/67A Princes Street,
Otahuhu,
Auckland,
NEW ZEALAND

[Handwritten signature] 13/X
2001

[Handwritten flourish]
Dear Mr. Levine,

My daughter Zahida sent me your most interesting letter of 20th September, together with the enclosures of the Medical Lore of India and two copies of Forest and Bird. All this is very fascinating.

In return I am sending you two copies of the Newsletter for Birdwatchers, and reprints about the Indian Baya from the Handbook of Salim Ali and Ripley. In view of what you have written about the Bottle Bird I think this material may be of interest.

It would be a great help and a pleasure if you could get a few subscribers to the Newsletter from your country. The exchange rate being what it is foreign money is always welcome, and the subscription is \$20/- per year, which can be remitted to the publisher whose name appears on the back page of the Newsletter.

Even if you do not subscribe, an occasional piece by you about the birds common between India and New Zealand would be very interesting.

With kind regards.

Yours sincerely,

[Handwritten signature]
Zafar Futehally

n.o.o.

c.c. Mr. Aasheesh Pittie, ✓
8-2-545 "Prem Parvat",
Road No.7,
Banjara Hills,
HYDERABAD - 500 034

- With ² copies of
Forest and Bird, } and
Medical Lore of India

} sent separately
by Book Post.

The Medical Lore of India

The poorer people of southern India cannot afford to go to a doctor to find cures for their ailments, for the very good reason that a single visit would take a large bite out of a week's earnings.

To give you an example: suppose a man has a sore or is suffering from a recent injury to a finger or leg, what would be the doctor's charges? Well, an injection of some sort would be indicated, probably anti-tetanus or penicillin in some form. Then there might be a dressing to be applied, together with tablets of some sulpha drug. The injection would cost at least 1.50 rupees. The dressing and tablets another rupee. The doctor's professional fees would be around 3.50 rupees, so that the bill would be in the region of six rupees, a figure that represents three days earnings at two rupees a day, if the patient is an unskilled labourer or a farm-hand, and a full day's earnings if he happens to be 'skilled'. So the ordinary man will think many times before going to a doctor.

So what does he do? He simply walks out on to the roadside where, within a few yards and in a minute or two he will undoubtedly come across a nice, warm flat mass of dung recently deposited by one of the many cattle that wander at will all over the streets and countryside. Our patient dips one or two of his fingers into the mess and comes up with a wet, sticky lump of dung which he applies to his wound, tapping the same in smartly till it covers the whole surface of the injury in the shape of a small saucer.

That is all there is to it. Does it work? Incredibly it does in the

great majority of cases. If, perchance, the treatment should fail and the wound not get better, or even gets worse, the reason (to the patient) is as plain as the nose on his face, and simple too. There was something wrong with the cow that passed the dung, and so he sets out to repeat the treatment with another sample of excreta.

'But tetanus germs live in cow dung!' you exclaim. 'The medical books say so.' Undoubtedly they do, but you would have a real hard time getting that idea across to the patient. He would not believe a word of what you said, for one thing. For another, he would not believe there were such things as germs. When you tell him they are so small that he cannot see them with his eyes, he concludes the tale is a figment of your imagination or ignorance, deliberately told in order to frighten him into seeing a doctor. Very likely you are a doctor yourself.

Cobwebs of the species of spider that lives in holes in the ground, and those of the variety that spins its webs between the branches of small bushes, where they scintillate with multicoloured light like clusters of jewels when the rising sun falls upon the dew that has gathered upon them, are sterling remedies when gathered freshly and plugged into freely bleeding wounds.

Juice from freshly broken pods of garlic is said to allay the irritation caused by mosquito bites, while for any form of eye-trouble the patient should stand facing the rising sun and squeeze orange-peel into his eyes. Equal quantities by weight of finely powdered indigo seeds and finely powdered tobacco-leaf, put into the eyes at night, is reputed to cure cataract, although the patient is cautioned to expect some sensation of burning.

The bottle-bird or Indian tree-sparrow performs a wonderful feat of architecture and tailoring when she builds her long, bottle-like nest of closely-woven fibres and suspends it by a single strand from a tall date palm. After laying her eggs, the mother bottle-bird searches the landscape later in the evening, at an hour when she would otherwise be safely in her nest, for an early fire-fly, or more than one fire-fly if she is lucky. Injuring the fire-fly sufficiently to prevent it from escaping, but not seriously enough to kill it outright, the wise little bird now introduces the insect into the nest through the cleverly-constructed entrance that, strangely enough, is at its lower end.

IT SOUNDS LIKE A WEAVER BIRD
OF SOME SORT

What does our villager do when hurrying home unduly late of an evening and happens to notice the glow of the fire-fly through the interstices of a nest? He does not stop and climb the tree right away to break down the nest and procure the elfin light within. That would take too long. He is already late and soon it will be quite dark. Moreover, he is alone. This is the hour when devils begin to emerge from their lairs beneath tombstones, from the trunks of neem and banyan trees, and from holes in the ground. In fact, the variety known as 'minnispurams' are known to live in tall trees. Or, if he is near a jungle, there is the possibility of encountering a wild beast. So he makes a note of the position of the tree in which the nest swings with its tiny lantern inside, and he hastens on his way.

The following morning he is back. Date-palms are notoriously difficult to climb because of their thorny trunks and spiked leaf-tips. Our yokel therefore brings with him from the village a long bamboo pole, or if any grow nearby he proceeds to lop one of suitable length.

With this he brings down the nest by beating the single strand that secures it to a frond, and then he loses no time in extracting the fire-fly. That tiny glimmer is invisible now in the dazzling sunshine, but the villager knows it will shine again once the sun goes down and darkness covers the land. He may keep it for good luck! Or he may eat it, for he reasons that the light will shine inside him, just as it shone in the nest, and will illuminate all the nooks and corners of his intestines so that the good spirit that looks after his welfare may be able to see and cure anything that is not quite right.

If young birds or eggs happen to be in the nest, he will throw them away with the rest of the nest, or if he is of a lower caste he might even eat the fledgelings.

Some of the wild creatures of this land are in great demand as medicine and are killed as soon as they are seen, if they are not lucky enough to get away. The black-faced grey langur monkey perhaps heads this list. Once common throughout the country, in southern India he has been slain mercilessly till the few of his kind that remain have moved into the innermost recesses of the forests. Even there they are shot by marauding bands of poachers, although their slaying is prohibited by the Government. All this

is done in the belief that the flesh of a langur monkey is one of the most effective aphrodisiacs any failing male can hope to find.

Another unfortunate creature that is sacrificed to make medicine for the same purpose is the elegant Indian slender lorris, mistakenly called a 'sloth'. It is a pretty little monkey, delicately made, with no tail and two large, limpid brown eyes that reflect the rays of a torch as if they were made of pools of crimson fire. As it moves rather slowly, this poor creature is easily captured. Then its two eyes are torn out of their sockets while it is still alive to make a marvellous aphrodisiac for some man who has spent a lifetime in womanising and has reached a stage when he can womanise no more. The lorris, still alive but bereft of its two eyes and totally blind, is thrown aside to fend for itself. Unhappily, these little beasts possess a good deal of vitality and linger for days, till they eventually die of starvation.

Once I happened to find one in this state. I took it home, attended to its torn eye-sockets as best I could, and fed it with milk. Despite its ghastly wounds the little monkey recovered. For a long time it would not trust me, nor allow me to touch it, and bit viciously. But could anybody blame the tiny creature for being distrustful of human beings after the terrible ordeal it had suffered at their hands? Eventually, however, this little animal understood that I meant it no harm and was trying to befriend it. From that moment it changed its attitude towards me. No more affectionate and gentle little creature have I kept as a pet at any time.

A third mammal that suffers greatly in southern India because of a belief that may or may not have any foundation is the large Indian fruit-bat, commonly referred to as the 'flying-fox'. The flesh of this mammal is reputed to be a very effective remedy for asthma, and as this complaint is widespread in the land despite its tropical climate, the flying-fox is diligently shot, or netted, whenever the opportunity offers. However, in this instance the mammal is killed outright and the flesh cooked, as in the case of the langur monkey, and so it escapes the awful fate that befalls the slender lorris.

Snakes that are non-poisonous also suffer a hard fate. The poisonous ones are killed and then burned (to prevent them from coming back to life), but the large and harmless snakes, such as