

SPEAKING *of* ANIMALS . . .

By Alan Devoe

THE CLAMPING down of the Iron Curtain has been an awful thing on many solemn and momentous counts. Also, for me personally, it has involved a small, preposterous and poignant sorrow. My mail does not bring me, any more, the "snake story."

I used to get it from places like Pinsk, Omsk, and Nether, Czechoslovakia. My correspondent was almost always at least a former Major-General in His Serene Highness's Imperial Hussars, or a nephew of His Apostolic Holiness of Odessa, or something like that. The story was always an eyewitness account, quite often with a supporting affidavit from an unimpeachable authority. It went like this:

A cleaning woman in our ancestral castle (so His Hereditary Magnificence would tell me) one day moved a heavy piece of furniture in an out-kitchen. Behold, there was disclosed a family of baby snakes. As our faithful Tanya emitted an outcry of sur-prise-ment, the mother snake came hurrying from outdoors, where she had been gathering food for her little ones. Aha, thought the snake, this wicked woman will kill my babes! I will revenge! Stealthy, thinking unobserved, mother snake glides to milk-crock on hearth, and in twin-

klung is spitting-in her terrible poison! But sharp-eyed Tanya sees and hurries to tell me. Rushing to out-kitchen, I pick up baby snakes, very gentle, and put them outside in grass. I show mother snake is only kindness meant. She watches in amaze as if thunder-stroke. Terrible remorse comes in her heart. Quick like a snake, she darts to hearth and overturns milk-crock, so her benefactors will not be drink poison! Is not this wonderful thing, showing how wise is mother-love even in serpent, and how strange and marvelous is nature, nyet?

Well. I used to get this story about once a week. I miss it. It used to give the work of being a naturalist a dreamy glow of extraordinary charm. I should be nearly inconsolable without it, if there were not fortunately a great many countries still outside the Iron Curtain, and spirited animal lovers in them to report to me the doings of their furred and feathered friends.

For instance, the matter of those North African gazelles. This account generally comes to me from a missionary's wife at a lonely desert outpost. She has always been a keen student of wildlife, she tells me; and of course a missionary's wife in a place like Mukh-al-Fabeeb has a lot of time for looking at it. Well,

these big, graceful gazelles had suffered only moderately from hunters until the invention of the jeep. Then, with servicemen careening around over the sand dunes, the slaughter of gazelles became heavy. Being sand-colored, the gazelles would be hard to see and shoot at, if it were not for their white rumps, which make perfect targets. It was a hunters' field day, while it lasted. But now it is over. The gazelles prance over the dunes continually alert for the sound of a jeep motor, which they have learned to distinguish from any other. The instant they hear one, they sit down.

THOUGH East Germany, under Communist domination, has fallen into silence, West Germany happily has not. It is a reassurance to know that the storks are still displaying their old morality, stern but just. It is difficult to see how anyone receiving the sober German-script letter in which Pastor Umlaut tells his personal experience with the storks on the rectory chimney could fail to realize that here is natural history at its most *erstaunlich*:

The stork nest had for many years been occupied by successive families of the great birds, and the massive structure of twigs atop *das Pfarrhaus* was a familiar and well-loved sight, as well as an omen of good luck. Well, last year Mama Stork had laid her customary four eggs and was preparing to brood them. Just about that time a grate-

ful parishioner chanced to give the pastor a fine goose egg. Being, like all Germans, a scientist at heart, it occurred to him that here was a chance for a valuable scientific experiment. Would a stork hatch a goose egg? While Mama Stork is absent from the nest, the pastor climbs quickly a *leiter* to the rooftop, removes a stork egg, and puts the goose egg in its place.

Mama Stork never notices the difference, and after a while comes the day of the hatching. *Wunderbar!* Here in the nest are three little storklets, and one gosling.

Pastor and villagers are chatting together on the village green about the experiment, when Papa Stork comes winging in for a first look at his offspring. They see him settle happily on the nest rim, peek in — and suddenly perform a convulsive double-take. He emits an ear-splitting *whawhp!*, and flaps off to a big tree where the storks of the village are wont to gather when not doing anything else.

Beak to beak, the birds join in excited, incredulous conversation. They are observed to look again and again toward the nest on the rectory chimney where Mama Stork, in simple-hearted domesticity, has resumed brooding her *jünglings*. After all, this is a respectable village, and evidence is evidence. It is obvious what *she* has been up to. With a mighty beating of massed wings, the stork flock takes to the air, flies to the rectory roof, and clobbers the

hapless, bewildered bird to death.

It goes to show, as the pastor concludes, that one should not thoughtlessly be too scientific. I don't see how it could be put better.

I must not give the impression that my files on noteworthy animal behavior are enriched by contributions of this caliber only from Europe, Asia or Africa. The U.S.A. is the native land of the hoop snake. Grandpa, in frontier days, often testified how even big trees swelled up and died when a hoop snake stung them. And it would be surprising if his grandsons today were not able to observe some impressively unusual occurrences outdoors.

WHEN BEARS break into a cabin, why do they so often go for the molasses? A naturalist without the benefit of sharp-eyed scouts dotted through the woods to report to him might suppose that the bears do that just because they like molasses. It turns out to be nothing so simple. With cheering dependability, letters from Chippewa Pete, up in Wolverine Junction, Maine, or Snowshoe Charlie out in Last Elk, Idaho, furnish me with meticulous firsthand accounts.

As Chippewa (or Snowshoe) tells it, he got to his cabin one day just after the visit of a bear. The bear had busted open the molasses, and there was a regular sludge of molassified bear-tracks on the floor. Seizing his gun, the woodsman sets out to trail the marauder. After pushing

through the dense timber for a while he comes to the bank of a rushing, crystal-clear stream. Halting abruptly, he stands transfixed. There, on the opposite bank, sits the bear, holding a molassesey forepaw out over the water and lost in a trance of concentration. The sticky molasses has attracted, of course, a lot of flies. As these buzz around the gooey paw, trout come leaping up to catch them. *Swish-SWOP* goes Bruin's cunning paw, and a fine fat trout is conveyed to his hungry mouth. Again the molasses-baited paw is alluringly dangled over the water. Chippewa Pete watches until he can stand the wonder of the scene no longer; then he hot-moccasins back to his cabin to write to me.

In the Armed Forces, there seems to be something about foreign travel that sharpens this gift for wildlife observing. It is from Korea, currently, that I hear about Cedric. Sometimes the fellows in the outfit prefer to call him Percy or Clarence. But there is agreement that he is the largest cockroach that anyone — even the Colonel — has ever had occasion to live with, and the one with the cutest personality. He has a way of wagging his whiskers, or suddenly peering up over the rim of a foot-locker, that endears him to everybody and causes him to be regarded as virtually a mascot.

Well, one day it becomes apparent that the barracks are really getting much too overrun by cockroaches.

Army exterminators move in. Not until they have been at their deadly work for some time does somebody remember that poor Cedric has been left in quarters along with all the common garden-variety cockroaches. Everybody feels awful about this. When the barracks are aired out, the men file sadly in and start looking for the corpse of their old friend. Suddenly there is a shout of joy. Cedric has been found, alive and well, up among the gear on a storage shelf. Whiskers jauntily awaggle, he comes forth to greet his comrades. Ingenious old Cedric has spent the fumigation period inside a gas mask.

IF AMERICAN observers' reports are perhaps not the ones that cast, for me, the very loveliest light of eerie beauty upon the subject of animal behavior, it cannot be because of any want of the unusual in the narratives. It can only be, I guess, because America is a country of democratic cast. So it does not have people named Major the Right Honourable Sir Hubert Ffitch-Fothering, O.B.E., F.R.Z.S., who can write letters in a finely formed Etonian hand from places like Bubulistan Pass, Northern Nepal. Things like that, it may be, are essential for bringing out full flavor. Anyhow, it is the Ffitch-Fotherings of the world who send me the story about the tiger. The minute I see an envelope bearing postage calculated in rupees and annas, my spirits be-

gin to rise. If the sender's name has a hyphen in it, good. Two hyphens, better. If the envelope, on being raised to the nose, should prove to have a faint lingering aroma of *chota-peg* . . . well, I can be just about certain. I am hearing from the Major. He has many names and far-flung addresses, but to me he is always, with simple reverence, just the Major. Here is his story. Should anyone doubt it (he is always quick to say), one need but write, for character reference, to his old schoolmaster, Canon Dimly, of The Larches, Furzebury-in-the-Weald, Hants. Warrantly enough? Obviously. Let us carry on, then.

On a hunting party in Bengal in '09 (writes the Major) I had advanced across a clearing and plunged into a dense growth of underbrush and bamboo. I had gone but a few paces when suddenly, without warning, a gigantic tiger sprang with frightful snarls straight at my face. In the fraction of a second, I had the presence of mind to fling myself flat on my face. The huge cat overshoot me, and its momentum carried it, indeed, out of sight along the rough trail I had broken. For some seconds I lay motionless. Then, hearing no sound, I rose and, with rifle at the ready, retraced my steps. At the edge of the clearing I paused in amazement, spellbound. There was the tiger. With a look of intense disgust and irritation on his face, he was bounding about the clearing — practicing low jumps.



THE BATTLING *Belles*

By JOHN HUNT *and* BILL McILWAIN

CHILL autumn winds rippled through the mountains of southwest Virginia, and in a clapboard farmhouse, two girls in their late teens engaged in earnest debate.

The year was 1862.

"But do you think we can get away with it?" the younger girl asked doubtfully. "All those men and . . ."

"Unk's gone over to the Yankees, damn him," the other declared, "and we should try to make up for him."

Thus began the fabulous, but little-known, Civil War saga of the fighting Bell girls, Mollie and Mary.

Cousins, they had grown up together on the mountainside farm. But, when the opportunist uncle who had reared them skipped to greener Yankee pastures, Mollie Bell was infuriated. Hot-blooded and Rebel to the bone, she persuaded Mary to join her in a fantastic scheme to enter the Confederate Army.

Definitely not lacking the pleas-

ing but obvious characteristics of their sex, the girls planned carefully to effect a disguise. Thick woolen workshirts hid the curves of young womanhood, and they cropped their hair to conform to the male styles of the day. And when brought from way down *here*, their voices were not a whit higher than those of many fuzzy-faced lads who left their Dixie homes to fight for the Great Cause.

At last they were ready to face the recruiters. Mollie, a fierce, dark-haired little warrior — always the leader of the two — signed up as Bob Morgan; and Mary, younger and more reserved, as Tom Parker. Farm backgrounds stood them in good stead. Their riding ability quickly won them the saddles and sabres of cavalrymen.

Their baptism of fire came quickly. Less than a month later, a Federal force overran the troop and took every living member prisoner.

Brief indeed had been the fighting careers of Mollie and Mary Bell, it