

**THE TRIBES ON MY
FRONTIER; AN
INDIAN NATURALIST'S
FOREIGN POLICY**

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The tribes on my frontier; an Indian naturalist's foreign policy by Edward Hamilton Aitken

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EDWARD HAMILTON AITKEN

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PREFACE

THESE papers were written during the Afghan War, and made the *débüt* in the *Times of India*. They come on the stage again in answer to what vanity fancied was an encore. Perhaps it was the voice of the Scotchman crying, "Ong-core ! Ong-core ! We'll hae nae mair o' that."

CONTENTS

	PAGE
A DURBAR	I
THE RATS	11
THE MOSQUITO	24
THE LIZARDS	33
THE ANTS	44
THE CROWS	55
THE BATS	64
BEES, WASPS, ET HOC GENUS OMNE	75
THE SPIDERS	85
THE BUTTERFLY : HUNTING HIM.	95
THE BUTTERFLY: CONTEMPLATING HIM	106
THE FROGS	116
THE BUGS	126
THE BIRDS OF THE GARDEN	135
THE BIRDS AT THE MANGO TOPE	147
THE BIRDS AT THE TANK	158
THE POULTRY-YARD	172
THE WHITE ANTS	184
THE HYPODERMATIKOSYRINGOPHOROI	193
ETCETERA	207

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

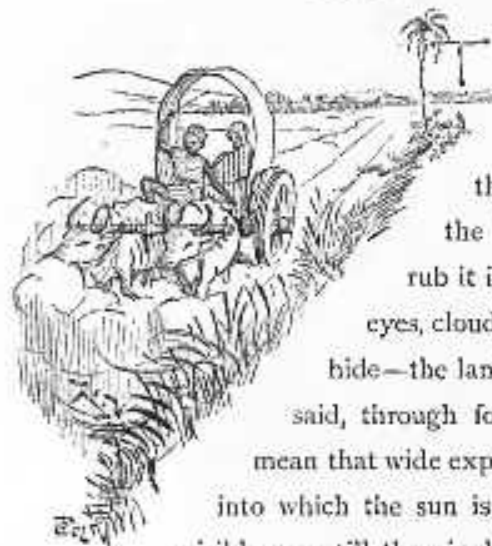
	PAGE
NATIVES SHIKARRING DUCKS	<i>Frontispiece</i>
DEFIANCE	13
AN ANXIOUS MOMENT	19
A DETACHMENT	39
THE PURSUIT OF PLEASURE	43
AMONGST THE PHILISTINES	60
FAMILY AFFECTION	71
SPORT SECOND TO NONE	97
FOR LIFE	123
OUTWITTED	141
THE MANGO TOPE	151
ROAST KULLUM LOOMING	161
THE SERGEANT	177
LIBERTY	209

FRONTISPIECE.—NATIVES SHIKARRING DUCKS.—The wild ducks, familiar with floating gorges, are unsuspecting of the natives, who wade towards them covered by a chafed, or earthenware vessel, very like a gourd, and draw them under water by the legs.

THE TRIBES ON MY FRONTIER.

A DURBAR.

June.



IS June in Dusty-
pore. Fancy a
scorching wind
that seems to gather
the heat together, and
rub it into your cheeks and
eyes, clouds of dust that nearly
hide—the landscape I had almost
said, through force of habit, but I
mean that wide expanse of negativeness
into which the sun is striking his almost
visible rays till the air distinctly quivers and
trembles under them; no ice, no resource except “thinking
on the frosty Caucasus,” or sitting behind those rheumatic

and agueferous devices, tatties and thermantidotes. Bombay people do not know what heat is. The only thing to be complained of at this time in Bombay is a certain tendency to liquefaction. Chemically speaking, one gets deliquescent about the end of May. The melting mood is strongest during the morning walk; at the end of it there is little left of one but a pool of water. But abjure walking, court the sea-breeze, or sit under punkahs, and the climate of Bombay is balmy. These are the signs by which any one may know *hot* weather. When you take a change of raiment from the drawer and it feels like fresh-baked bread, when you put on your coat and it settles like a blister on your back, when returning to dinner from the evening constitutional you feel as you step through the doorway that you are entering a limekiln, then the weather is getting hot. In such weather every Oriental whose hard fate has not made him a punkah-puller religiously enjoys his midday nap, and so about noon a quiet as of a Scotch Sabbath comes over the land.

Just at that time when all is stillest and sleepest, I hold a *levée*, for a house is like the shadow of a great rock in a weary land, and to its blessed shelter, as the sun grows fiercer and fiercer, all the neighbourhood "foregathers."

The choicest place, of course, is that moist spot at the back of the house, under the pomegranate-trees, where the bath-water runs out into the ground. The fowls have taken possession of that, and are fitting themselves into little hollows scraped in the cool damp earth. The next best place is the broad verandah, with the elephant-creeper oppressing the trellis. Here long before noon the birds begin to come together. Up among the rafters first I generally detect a social lark* sitting solitary and speechless; then down among the roots of the creeper, hopping idly about, turning over a dead leaf here and there, and talking to one another in querulous falsettos, come a dozen dingy-brown "rat-birds,"† feeble folk, which keep in flocks, because they have not back-bone enough to do anything singly. They are just miniatures of the "Seven Brothers," only there are no differences of opinion among them. A little later on, two or three well-breakfasted *mynas* drop in and assume comfortable digestive attitudes. The *myna* is the most proper of birds, respectable as Littimer himself. In his sober, snuff-brown suit and yellow beak, he is neither foppish nor slovenly, and

* *Calandrella brachydactyla*.

† The striped bush-habblers (*Chattarrhax caudata*).