

Hairbreadth Escapes in a Wild Animal Show

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DANGER and death are always present at each public performance and private rehearsal of a wild animal show, for the apparent docility secured by training is only a veneer, and the wild, fierce nature of these beasts is likely to break out at any time. The tinsel and outward glitter simply cover a life of incessant labour, constant danger and hairbreadth escapes known only to those who are or can see behind the scenes.

Some time ago I determined to live for a while in an animal show. After I had been there a short time two things impressed themselves strongly upon me. One was the large number of narrow escapes from death about which the public never hears, and the other was that I, although only a visitor to the show, was still in considerable danger from the animals.

This last was brought home to me in a way I am not likely to forget. One of the trainers, a quiet man, who possessed marvellous nerve and courage, the only man in the world who has appeared in public with twenty-seven lions, had agreed to bring three of them into the arena for the purpose of showing me how they had been taught to do their tricks. I was sitting on a high stool close to the arena in front, and had watched two of the lions come in from the back, when the trainer, who was inside with the animals, came quietly toward me and begged me not to speak or move. I was a trifle puzzled, but at this moment I became conscious that something was coming toward me on my right, and instinctively I guessed what it was.

I kept still, but turned my eyes slowly, and there, quite close to me, was a big tawny lion! His mouth was partly open and he was coming forward slowly and quietly. I cannot describe my sensations, because I think I really hadn't any. I only know that when he reached me and calmly stopped to smell my dress his head seemed as large as a mountain, and all my flesh felt as though turned to ice. He lifted his huge head, looked at me casually—while I looked back as in a dream—smelled my dress again, and walked quietly away.

The trainer had hurried out and followed him closely, and with a sharp command and a flick of the whip sent the king of beasts promptly into a cage which had been opened to receive him. The whole affair was over in less than two minutes. I was told that my escape was due entirely to my keeping so still, and that I was very brave; it was bravely, however, but simply a numbness which overpowered me.

At another time, while visiting the training school, I was actually seized by a grizzly bear. The training school was in a very strong shed communicating with the cages by a passage-way. One side of the school was divided off by iron bars which reached from the

ceiling to the ground, leaving a passage through to the exercising field beyond. I had been watching with great interest two bears being taught to stand on a barrel together, and to roll it. It was a difficult task, and took time and patience, but the little bears did their best, while an enormous grizzly sat in a corner sucking his paws and humming contentedly to himself. I was so interested in the little fellows that I went over to the bars to watch them.

Suddenly the trainer, with a shout first at me and then at the grizzly, dashed towards us. At the same instant I felt a hard, tight grip at my knees, and I realised that the grizzly was trying to drag me into the cage. I seized the bars with both hands, and when, after what seemed an eternity, the trainer reached us, I felt the terrible clutch loosen, and the great beast was driven back to his corner.

Perhaps the most dangerous thing I did in the show was to go into the runway with the lion-trainer. This runway is the passage-way for the animals from their cages to the arena. It is closed with an iron gate, and at intervals there are little wooden doors across it. Should an animal get into the runway, the trainer closes one of these doors—if he is quick enough—and although the small wooden partition is but a frail protection against an infuriated wild beast, still it gains time and often saves a life.

When we entered the runway, and the great iron gate clanged behind us, I realised that our sole means of exit had been closed, and that only the thin wooden doors of the cages separated us from their wild occupants. Most of the animals seemed to be asleep at first, but when we were fairly in we heard the sound of soft footsteps and sniffings and scratchings at the cage door. As I passed one door it lurched toward me alarmingly. The trainer with a sharp order gave the door a rap with the heavy, loaded end of his whip, which caused it to return to its place with a snap, while a savage growl came from the animal behind it.

By this time nearly all the animals were aroused, and there were sounds of leaping and restless footsteps, with continued sniffing. The trainer showed me the little wooden doors, shut one, and then, with a swift, dexterous wrench, took it off its hinges, and presented it toward me as a shield.

On one side of each door was a wooden handle, as otherwise a trainer's hands could be torn away at the first touch. The sound of the removal of the door roused the animals to the highest pitch of excitement. The trainer spoke in a peremptory manner, calmly reined the door, and we went to the end of the runway. On our return the movements grew wilder and wilder, and as I passed each door it seemed as though the animal inside it were throwing himself against it. Just as we went through the big iron gateway there was the crash of breaking wood, and one of the lions leaped into the runway! The trainer gave me a gentle push into safety, locked the gate, and went back to meet the animal face to face. The lion stood with gleaming eyes, his tail extended behind him—always a bad sign—but there was the crack of a whip, the report of a pistol, and when the smoke cleared away the lion was again in his cage, and the trainer was smiling as he nailed up the door.

Photographing the animals almost resulted in accidents several times. "Taking the animals' pictures" sounds easy, and I thought that they would be compelled to take their positions, and when in good poses the photographer would press the bulb of his camera and the thing would be done. I also thought that in one morning we should get through

with the whole matter. Instead, at the end of a week spent in hard work, we had just eight photographs, taken at the cost of infinite time, trouble and patience, and of these eight three were useless.

It was decided that the first trial should be a group of five lions and their trainer—a woman. Trouble began early, for the lions refused to come into the arena. Trying to rouse them the trainer touched one lion lightly with the whip. He struck at the whip gently with his paw as though to put it out of his way, his claws caught in the light dress, and nearly all the back and sides were torn to shreds. This necessitated a postponement until the dress could be pinned up, but when this was done the five lions were on their pedestals and everything was ready. A long whip held by a trainer outside the arena hung over each tawny head; the trainer took her position in front, and the signal was about to be given when it was noticed that the big lion was going to investigate with his huge paw a new bow on his trainer's head. There was imminent danger to the woman, for lions do not touch anything lightly. His paw was a ready out when he got a smart flick on his nose from the whip nearest him. Now, as it happened, this lion was usually touched with the whip only when he refused to get down from his pedestal when the performance was over, and only rarely at that, because it ruffled his temper. In this case it had the desired effect—it diverted his attention—but he unfortunately took it as his cue to get down, and so came to the ground with a heavy thump, promptly followed by all the others. In vain the trainer ceased and commanded. The lions evidently thought their performance was over, and absolutely refused to do anything more. So the trainer had to postpone the photographing to another day.

PHOTOGRAPHING WILD ANIMALS IS NOT AN EASY TASK.

The same group was tried the next day, and again the next. The second day the flashlight so frightened the lions that they sprang off their pedestals and rushed around the arena roaring terrifically, and their excitement, communicating to the other animals, caused such restlessness that all photographing had to be put off until the following day. The third day a picture was taken just when the big lion was evidently meditating another investigation of his trainer's headgear.

It was then decided to photograph some of the quiet animals. The yak and the camels appeared indifferent to the whole matter, and their photographs were easily taken, but one of the three elephants made lots of trouble. He manifested the most intense curiosity

about the camera, and wanted to examine it with his trunk. Farther and farther and farther back the photographer ther back the photographer drew his camera, but each time the elephant advanced and so put out the whole group. Finally he was given a small bottle—one of his tricks was to drink from a bottle—and the photograph was taken.

Then we all went round to the llamas. Their curiosity made it easy to get their attention, but just when all was ready, two of them made up their minds that the photographing party was an unfriendly one, and opened hostilities by spitting at us. All drew off hastily, and while the necessary process of cleansing was going on the camera was forgotten. The big elephant, however, was still interested in the apparatus, and walking up to it tried to pick it up and sent it crashing to the ground. This added to the general confusion, and in the midst of it all a voice from the gallery announced that the baboon had escaped. After a hot chase the big ape was caught and order was restored.

The motley group, consisting of lions, tigers, bear-hounds, etc., gave infinite trouble. As soon as some of the animals were placed others got down from their positions, and the first time the flashlight was used there was a real pandemonium. Two large tigers and the polar bears also gave just as much trouble as they possibly could. The tigers would not stay in their places, the polar bears would fight, and the time, patience and trouble involved can be appreciated only by those who have actually witnessed such scenes.

WHEN THE SIGHT OF "BLOOD" INFURIATED LIONS.

Shortly after my arrival at the show five lions and two tigers were added, and immediately every lion and tiger in the place got "ugly."

Then began a period of trials and escapes for all. The new animals were very wild, the lions especially, and it was decided that, dangerous as it was, they should be turned into the arena for exercise. While waiting for the entrance of the new animals I saw a man go to an iron door on one side of the arena, open it, put a pail inside the arena, and close it again.

The runway doors swung open, there was an instant's silence, and then the five lions rushed in with such a whirl that I instinctively sprang backward. I have never seen such frantic beasts, as, with mouths open and eyes aflame with rage and terror, they charged the high, strong bars of the arena, making the whole building quiver with the impact. Back and forth they raced, their one thought to get out and away, while the trainers stood outside the arena speaking gently to them.

Suddenly one lion timed over the little pail; it rolled down the sloping floor, making a noise which added to the fright of the already terrified animals. As they rushed around, the pail was rolled from place to place, and when a thin stream of red was seen on the floor the trainers became anxious.

Efforts were made to get the lions out before others were wounded, but the entrance to the runway was dark, and they were afraid.

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