

BY WALTER SEVERN.



ON a dull afternoon during the Easter recess of 1872, I went out for a holiday stroll towards the river at Chelsea, and on finding myself near to that Dutch-looking quarter, Cheyne Walk, I determined to discover the abode of an old friend, who I had reason to know lodged in the locality. As I knew he was an inveterate smoker, I inquired about him at a tobacconist's, who told me that he had apartments in one of the quaint old houses with ornamental iron gates.

On passing through the gate and ringing the bell, the door was opened by an individual in shirt-sleeves, who informed me that my friend was away. Attracted by the gentlemanly bearing of the coatless individual, whom I had at first taken for a carpenter, I remained talking to him about the quaintness of the old hall and its paintings. I am sure we both felt that there was something sympathetic in our natures—perhaps this consisted in a touch of æsthetic Bohemianism—at all events, he pressed me to stay and smoke with him.

We sat in the front parlour, and chatted pleasantly over a log fire which was burning in a fire-place from which the grate had been removed. Of course we soon discovered that we had mutual friends—where did I ever go, or whom did I ever meet, without making this discovery? After a time, I began to look round the room: no carpet, an old table, a dilapidated sofa, and a few chairs—an impression of curious untidiness was left on my mind.

While looking at some small pictures hanging crooked on the wall, I noticed, what struck me as being very odd, a red blanket protruding from a hole in the wainscoting, near the mantel-piece. In reply to my inquiry as to what this meant, my host said, "Oh! that is where we keep our snakes; are you afraid of snakes?" Before I could stammer out a reply, and while I was trying to steady my nerves, he thrust in his arm, and pulled out with the blanket a lot of serpents, which tumbled on to the ground and the table. Another dive brought out the rest of the blanket, and with it *two large snakes*, which he informed me were special favourites—a python and a boa constrictor. These at once coiled themselves all round my host's body, in and out of his arms, and about his neck.

Dazed with astonishment and shaking with fear, I tried to retreat, but he assured me, in winning accents

and soft words, that the "dear things" were quite tame; and for some minutes we stood, I close to the window—which I thought might afford a means of escape—and he between me and the door. Suddenly my eccentric host, who had very large excited eyes, called out that he must really fetch down his wife, and shovelling off the two monsters on to the floor (which he did not do without some difficulty), he darted from the room, closing the door behind him.

\* \* \* \* \*

I leave you, kind readers, to imagine my feelings! I experienced a creepy sensation in my hair, and strange feelings of fascination, faintness, and fear stole over me, as I stood rooted to the floor, afraid even to look round at my possible window-escape. The two huge monsters crawled stealthily up the sofa, and kept stretching out their necks to gaze at me, their forked tongues jerking in and out, and their eyes staring with what seemed to me a devilish inquisitiveness. Dante's *Inferno*, the *Laocoon* group, and other horrors, filled my brain.

The silence was only disturbed by the beating of my poor heart, and I knew not how long it was before the door opened, and my host reappeared with a pretty lady, who, after a smiling curtsy to me, lifted the snakes from the sofa, or rather, leaning towards them, allowed them to entwine themselves quickly round her comely figure. Although still frightened, I began to heave sighs of relief, and I could not help being impressed by the picturesqueness of the scene. The lady's black velvet bodice showed off to great advantage the large snake-coils, with their curious markings, and her rich brown hair was soon charmingly ruffled by the caresses of the snakes as they poked their noses through it. In a few minutes two little girls appeared, and tripping up to their mother, began playing with the snakes, calling the boa "*Cleopatra dear*," and actually kissing its nose, until the snake tried impatiently to withdraw its neck from their fond little hands.

Mrs. M., who seemed overweighted with the two snakes, asked her husband to relieve her of the python, and she then proposed that we should have some coffee, which was brought in by the little girls. By this time I had regained my self-possession, and watched her with the keen interest of an artist as she poured out the coffee, and tapped occasionally the head of the boa, which was inquisitively stretched out towards me. During this time the smaller snakes were all about the room, a green one half hidden in the blotting-book and others hanging from the table and chairs, and from Mr. M.'s pockets.

Several months after this adventure, I happened to be at a rather smart wedding, and meeting Lord Arthur Russell (who I knew was a lover of snakes), I narrated the circumstances to him, and was rather taken aback by his proposal that we should go away, there and then, in a hansom cab to Chelsea. "Surely,"

I exclaimed, "you don't propose to leave this goodly company" (Mr. Gladstone was there, among many other celebrities) "and this goodly cheer, to see the snakes?"

"The guests are met, the feast is set:  
Mays't hear the merry din."

But he was evidently determined. So off we drove to Cheyne Walk, where we fortunately found the snake-charmers at home, and saw much the same scene that I have already described. Lord Arthur was more venturesome than I was, and got one of the smaller reptiles up his sleeve, and Mr. M. had to come to the rescue, and draw it forth through his shirt-cuff. We were shown a very perfect skin, apparently about three yards long, which Mr. M. coolly told us the boa had cast while in bed with him one cold night. He felt "the poor thing fretting about," and kept telling it to be quiet, but it would persist in squeezing between his legs and feet, and in the morning he found that it had shed its skin!

Mr. and Mrs. M. informed us that once, when they were away for two months, they left the two big snakes in charge of a keeper at the Zoo. On their return, the keeper said that if they had delayed much longer the boa might have died, as it was refusing food; and when he produced the snake, it recognised Mrs. M.'s voice, and sprang at her with such vehement affection as nearly to upset her, coiling itself closely round her until they reached home in a cab. Our hosts also informed us that one summer's evening, when the family (including all the snakes) were having tea in the garden, Cleopatra kept swinging from a tree by its tail, and Mr. M., thinking it a good opportunity to gauge the strength of the boa, placed himself under the tree, and allowed the snake to coil itself round his waist. He then found that he could lift his feet from the ground. We were also informed that if the big snakes once made pets of live animals given for food—which they were apt to do when not hungry—they would never eat them, but would wait until fresh beasts or birds were provided.

I must now narrate, in his own language, an incident about these snakes written out for me by an Italian friend, who says—"Ecco il racconto dell'aneddoto dei serpenti; but please correct the English and clean it up. I cannot do better in your language, so much in hurry as you are for it. Mr. M. he was a composer of music; he was very fond of serpents or snakes, and he made a very particular study in the natural history about such kind of fearful reptiles. He very often spoke to me, desirous to show me these animals, which he nursed with care, and brooded the eggs to generate the little ones.

"At the back of his appartement there was a small garden, and next a kind of orchard court, where a merchant of chickens and fowls had a nursery of these domestic animals, which he kept for trade. At that time Mr. M. had in his bed-room two enormous

boa constrictors, which slept with him as two little babies, as Mr. M. was confident that not treason or mischief could come from them, so beloved and well trained by him. So he took his sleep confidently every night. But the wild ibrid animals, with a natural bad instinct for rapine and murder, would smell often their prey, the poor innocent chickens, and when Mr. M. peacefully slept, the horrid reptiles oozed from the bed, and silently crept to the gardens where the chickens were, killing and eating often of them. During this assault the chickens begun to *croak*, and some time the proprietor was awaked and visited the garden, and when he discovered a chicken dying and others destroyed, he began for to watch during many nights, till, what was the horror and fright of the master when, at the feeble light of the break of the day, he discovered a sterminate serpent with a large chicken strangled in its coils! At sudden he gave the alarm and called the police; all the neighbours' houses were also frightened; at last he discovers that Mr. M. was the keeper of such extraordinary nuisible things, and went to the court, where the magistrate summoned Mr. M.; but, strange to say, there was not a slight intention found on the part of the unconscious Mr. M. to give harm to anybody, and he was not at all punished for it, but only warned to take measures as to assure that the two serpents would have not in future to make so romantic assays in like excursions nightly to the mild and useful race of bipeds so good for human food."

Some years later, while I was abroad, I noticed in the English newspapers an account of a Chancery suit affecting my friends and their beloved snakes, and on my return, finding that they were likely to be turned out of their house, owing to a stray snake having frightened a neighbour's servant into a fit, I wrote a letter to the *Times*, in defence of the snakes, which will be found quoted in Dr. Romanes' book on "Animal Intelligence." In spite of my protestations, the serpents were declared to be a dangerous nuisance, and my friends were turned out, nearly broken-hearted and ruined.

After a long interval I heard of them again from the late Frank Buckland, who was a kind friend to the family. They were living quietly with their snakes in small lodgings near Leicester Square. One day Mr. M., who was a delicate man, was seized with a fainting-fit, and remained on his bed insensible while Mrs. M. hastened out for the doctor. On her return with Buckland, they found Mr. M. still on the bed, but regaining his consciousness. He was weeping over the prostrate body of his beloved Cleopatra. The snake, suspecting something wrong, had evidently crept up-stairs, and when it found its beloved master insensible had experienced some kind of shock. Partly on the bed and partly trailing on the ground, the poor boa was found *stone-dead!*

