

IV. CATS.

ONE evening before dinner-time the present writer had occasion to go into a dining-room where the cloth was already laid, the glasses all in their places on the sideboard and table, and the lamp and candles lighted. A cat, which was a favourite in the house, finding the door ajar, entered softly after me, and began to make a little exploration after his manner. I have a fancy for watching animals when they think they are not observed, so I affected to be entirely absorbed in the occupation which detained me there, but took note of the cat's proceedings without in any way interrupting them. The first thing he did was to jump upon a chair, and thence upon the sideboard. There was a good deal of glass and plate upon that piece of furniture, but nothing as yet which, in the cat's opinion, was worth purloining : so he brought all his paws together on the very edge of the board, the two fore-paws in the middle, the others on both sides, and sat balancing himself in that attitude for a minute or two, whilst he contemplated the long glittering vista of the table. As yet there was not an atom of anything eatable upon it, but the cat probably thought he might as well ascertain whether this were so or not by a closer inspection, for with a single spring he cleared the abyss and alighted noiselessly on the table-cloth. He walked all over it and left no trace ; he passed amongst the slender glasses, fragile-stemmed, like air-bubbles cut in half and balanced on spears of ice ; yet he disturbed nothing, broke nothing,



A FASCINATING TALE.

Pen drawing by E. H. Saunders, after Madame Ronner.

anywhere. When his inspection was over he slipped out of sight, having been perfectly inaudible from the beginning, so that a blind person could only have suspected his visit by that mysterious sense which makes the blind aware of the presence of another creature.

This little scene reveals one remarkable characteristic of the feline nature, the innate and exquisite refinement of its behaviour. It would be infinitely difficult, probably even impossible, to communicate a delicacy of this kind to any animal by teaching. The cat is a creature of most refined and subtle perceptions naturally. Why should she tread so carefully? It is not from fear of offending her master and incurring punishment, but because to do so is in conformity with her own ideal of behaviour; exactly as a lady would feel vexed with herself if she broke anything in her own drawing-room, though no one would blame her *mal-adresse* (awkwardness), and she would never feel the loss.

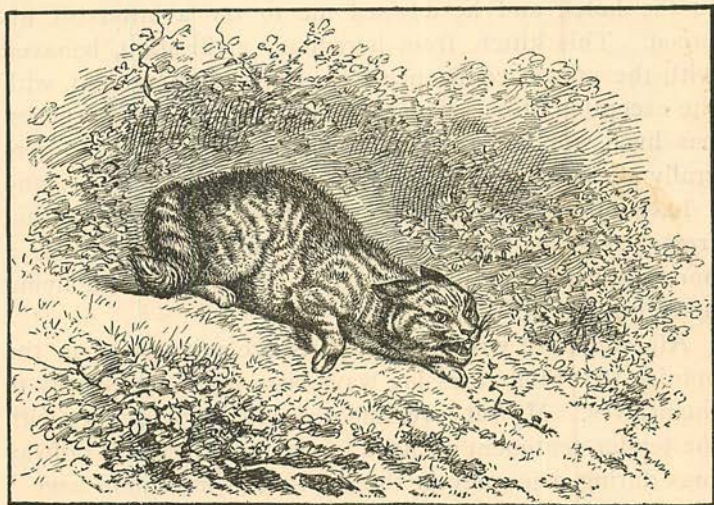
The contrast in this respect between cats and other animals is very striking. I will not wrong the noble canine nature so far as to say that it has no delicacy, but its delicacy is not of this kind, not in actual touch, as the cat's is. The motions of the cat, being always governed by the most refined sense of touch in the animal world, are typical in quite a perfect way of what we call tact in the human world. And as a man who has tact exercises it on all occasions for his own satisfaction, even when there is no positive need for it, so a cat will walk daintily and observantly everywhere, whether amongst the glasses on a dinner-table or the rubbish in a farm-yard.

It is easy to detract from the admirableness of this delicate quality in the cat by a reference to the necessities of her life in a wild state. Any one not much disposed to enter into imaginative sentimentalities about

animals might say to us, "What you admire so much as a proof of ladylike civilisation in the cat, is rather an evidence that she has retained her savage habits. When she so carefully avoids the glasses on the dinner-table she is not thinking of her behaviour as a dependent on civilised man, but acting in obedience to hereditary habits of caution in the stealthy chase, which is the natural accomplishment of her species. She will stir no branch of a shrub lest her fated bird escape her, and her feet are noiseless that the mouse may not know of her coming." This, no doubt, would be a probable account of the origin of that fineness of touch and movement which belongs to cats, but the fact of that fineness remains. In all the domestic animals, and in man himself, there are instincts and qualities still more or less distinctly traceable to a savage state, and these qualities are often the very basis of civilisation itself. That which in the wild cat is but the stealthy cunning of the hunter, is refined in the tame one into a habitual gentleness, often very agreeable to ladies, who dislike the boisterous demonstrations of the dog and his incorrigible carelessness.

This quality of extreme caution, which makes the cat avoid obstacles that a dog would dash through without a thought, makes her at the same time somewhat reserved and suspicious in all the relations of her life. If a cat has been allowed to run half wild this suspicion can never be overcome. There was a numerous population of cats in this half-wild state for some years in the garrets of my house. Some of these were exceedingly fine, handsome animals, and I very much wished to get them into the rooms we inhabited, and so domesticate them; but all my blandishments were useless. The nearest approach to success was in the case of a superb white-and-black ani-

mal, who, at last, would come to me occasionally, and permit me to caress his head, because I scratched him behind the ears. Encouraged by this measure of confidence, I went so far on one occasion as to lift him a few inches from the ground; on which he behaved himself very much like a wild cat just trapped in the woods, and



WILD CAT.

Pen drawing by D. Munro, after the etching by Karl Bodmer.

for some days after it was impossible even to get near him. He never came down-stairs in a regular way, but communicated with the outer world by means of roofs and trees, like the other untameable creatures in the garrets. On returning home after an absence I sought him vainly, and have never encountered him since.

This individual lived on the confines of civilisation, and it is possible that his tendency to friendliness might have

been developed into a feeling more completely trustful by greater delicacy and care. I happened to mention him to an hotel-keeper who was unusually fond of animals, and unusually successful in winning their affections. He told me that his own cats were remarkable for their uncommon tameness, being very much petted and caressed, and constantly in the habit of seeing numbers of people who came to the hotel, and he advised me to try a kitten of his breed. This kitten, from hereditary civilisation, behaved with the utmost confidence from the beginning, and, with the exception of occasional absences for his own purposes, has lived with me regularly enough. In winter he generally sleeps upon my dog, who submits in patience; and I have often found him on horseback in the stable, not from any taste for equestrianism, but simply because a horse-cloth is a perpetual warmer when there is a living horse beneath it.

All who have written upon cats are unanimous in the opinion that their caressing ways bear reference simply to themselves. My cat loves the dog and horse exactly with the tender sentiment we have for foot-warmers and railway rugs during a journey in the depth of winter, nor have I ever been able to detect any worthier feeling towards his master. Ladies are often fond of cats, and pleasantly encourage the illusion that they are affectionate; it is said too that very intellectual men have often a liking for the same animal. In both these cases the attachment seems to be due more to certain other qualities of the cat than to any strength of sentiment on his part. Of all animals that we can have in a room with us, the cat is the least disturbing. Dogs bring so much dirt into houses that many ladies have a positive horror of them; squirrels leap about in a manner highly dangerous to the ornaments of a

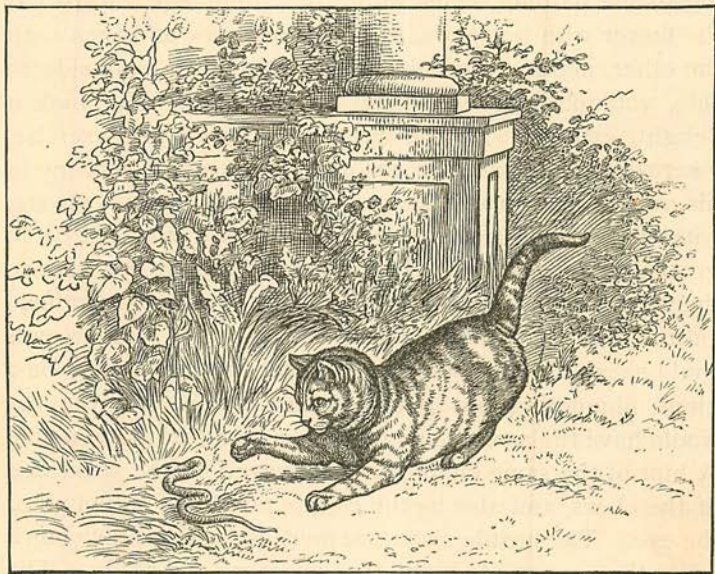
drawing-room; whilst monkeys are so incorrigibly mischievous that it is impossible to tolerate them, notwithstanding the nearness of the relationship. But you may have a cat in the room with you without anxiety about anything except eatables. He will rob a dish if he can get at it, but he will not, except by the rarest of accidents, displace a sheet of paper or upset an inkstand. The presence of a cat is positively soothing to a student, as the presence of a quiet nurse is soothing to the irritability of an invalid. It is agreeable to feel that you are not absolutely alone, and it seems to you, as you work, as if the cat took care that all her movements should be noiseless, purely out of consideration for your comfort. Then, if you have time to caress her, you know that there will be purring responses, and why inquire too closely into the sincerity of her gratitude? There have been instances of people who surrounded themselves with cats; old maids have this fancy sometimes, which is intelligible, because old maids delight in having objects on which to lavish their inexhaustible kindness, and their love of neatness and comfort is in harmony with the neat habits of these comfort-appreciating creatures. A dog on velvet is evidently out of place, he would be as happy on clean straw, but a cat on velvet does not awaken any sense of the incongruous. It is more difficult to understand how men of business ever take to cats. A well-known French politician, who certainly betrayed nothing feminine in his speeches, was so fond of cats that it was impossible to dine peaceably at his house on account of four licensed feline marauders which promenaded upon the dinner-table, helping themselves to everything, and jumping about the shoulders of the guests. It may be observed that in Paris cats frequently appear upon the table in another shape. I once stayed in a house not very far from the great tri-

umphal arch; and from my window, at certain hours of the day, might be observed a purveyor of dead cats who supplied a small cheap restaurant in a back street. I never went to eat at the restaurant, but ascertained that it had a certain reputation for a dish supposed to be made of rabbits. During the great siege, many Parisians who may frequently have eaten cat without knowing it (as you also may perchance have done, respected reader) came to eat cat with clear knowledge of the true nature of the feast, and they all seemed to agree that it was very good. Our prejudices about the flesh we use for food are often inconsistent, the most reasonable one seems to be a preference for vegetable feeders, yet we eat lobsters and pike. The truth is that nobody who eats even duck can consistently have a horror of cat's flesh on the ground of the animal's habits. And although the cat is a carnivorous animal, it has a passionate fondness for certain vegetable substances, delighting in the odour of valerian, and in the taste of asparagus, the former to ecstasy, the latter to downright gluttony.

Since artists cannot conveniently have lions and tigers in their studios, they sometimes like to have cats merely that they may watch the ineffable grace of their motions. Stealthy and treacherous as they are, they have yet a quite peculiar finish of style in action, far surpassing in certain qualities of manner the most perfectly-trained action of horses, or even the grace of the roe-deer or the gazelle. All other animals are stiff in comparison with the felines, all other animals have distinctly bodies supported by legs, reminding one of the primitive toy-maker's conception of a quadruped, a cylinder on four sticks, with a neck and head at one end and a tail at the other. But the cat no

The triumphal arch in Paris, is at the end of the Champs Élysées.

more recalls this rude anatomy than does a serpent. From the tips of his whiskers to the extremities of tail and claws he is so much living india-rubber. One never thinks of muscles and bones whilst looking at him (*has* he any muscles and bones?), but only of the reserved electric life that lies wait-



CAT AND SERPENT.

Pen drawing by D. Munro, after Karl Bodmer.

ing under the softness of the fur. What bursts of energy the creature is capable of! I once shut up a half-wild cat in a room and he flew about like a frightened bird, or like leaves caught in a whirlwind. He dashed against the window-panes like sudden hail, ran up the walls like arrested water, and flung himself everywhere with such rapidity, that he filled as much space, and filled it almost as dangerously, as twenty flashing swords. And yet this

incredibly wild energy is in the creature's quiet habits subdued with an exquisite moderation. The cat always uses precisely the necessary force, other animals roughly employ what strength they happen to possess without reference to the small occasion. One day I watched a young cat playing with a daffodil. She sat on her hind-legs and patted the flower with her paws, first with one paw and then with the other, making the light yellow bell sway from side to side, yet not injuring a petal or a stamen. She took a delight, evidently, in the very delicacy of the exercise, whereas a dog or a horse has no enjoyment of delicacy in his own movements, but acts strongly when he is strong, without calculating whether the force used may not be in great part superfluous. This proportioning of the force to the need is well known to be one of the evidences of refined culture, both in manners and in the fine arts. If animals could speak as fabulists have feigned, the dog would be a blunt, blundering, out-spoken, honest fellow, but the cat would have the rare talent of never saying a word too much. A hint of the same character is conveyed by the sheathing of the claws, and also by the contractability of the pupil of the eye. The hostile claws are invisible, and are not shown when they are wanted, yet are ever sharp and ready. The eye has a narrow pupil in broad daylight, receiving no more sunshine than is agreeable, but it will gradually expand as twilight falls, and clear vision needs a larger and larger surface. Some of these cat-qualities are very desirable in criticism. The claws of a critic ought to be very sharp, but not perpetually prominent, and his eye ought to see far into rather obscure subjects without being dazzled by plain daylight.

It is odd that, notwithstanding the extreme beauty of cats, their elegance of motion, the variety and intensity of

their colour, they should be so little painted by considerable artists. Almost all the pictures of cats which I remember were done by inferior men, often by artists of a very low grade indeed. The reason for this is probably, that although the cat is a refined and very voluptuous animal, it is so wanting in the nobler qualities as to fail in winning the serious sympathies of noble and generous-hearted men.

Mr. Manet once very appropriately introduced a black cat on the bed of a Parisian lorette, and this cat became quite famous for a week or two in all the Parisian newspapers, being also cleverly copied by the caricaturists. No other painted cat ever attracted so much attention, indeed "Le chat de M. Manet" amused Paris as Athens amused itself with the dog of *Alcibiades*.

M. Manet's cat had an awful look, and depths of meaning were discoverable in its eyes of yellow flame set in the blackness of the night. There has always been a feeling that a black cat was not altogether "canny." Many of us, if we were quite sincere, would confess to a superstition about black cats. They seem to know too much, and is it not written that their ancestors were the companions and accomplices of witches in the times of old? Who can tell what baleful secrets may not have been transmitted through their generations? There can be no doubt that cats know a great deal more than they choose to tell us, though occasionally they may let a secret out in some unguarded moment. Shelley the poet, who had an intense sense of the supernatural, narrates the following history, as he heard it from Mr. G. Lewis:—

M. Manet, a famous French painter.

The Black Cat; see the tale by Edgar Allan Poe.

The dog of Alcibiades; see Plutarch's Life.

“A gentleman on a visit to a friend who lived on the skirts of an extensive forest on the east of Germany lost his way. He wandered for some hours among the trees, when he saw a light at a distance. On approaching it, he was surprised to observe that it proceeded from the interior of a ruined monastery. Before he knocked, he thought it prudent to look through the window. He saw a multitude of cats assembled round a small grave, four of whom were letting down a coffin with a crown upon it. The gentleman, startled at this unusual sight, and imagining that he had arrived among the retreats of fiends or witches, mounted his horse and rode away with the utmost precipitation. He arrived at his friend’s house at a late hour, who had sat up for him. On his arrival, his friend questioned as to the cause of the traces of trouble visible on his face. He began to recount his adventure after much difficulty, knowing that it was scarcely possible that his friends should give faith to his relation. No sooner had he mentioned the coffin with the crown upon it, than his friend’s cat, who seemed to have been lying asleep before the fire, leaped up, saying, ‘Then I am the King of the Cats!’ and scrambled up the chimney and was seen no more.”

Now, is not that a remarkable story, proving, at the same time, the attention cats pay to human conversation even when they outwardly seem perfectly indifferent to it, and the monarchical character of their political organization, which without this incident might have remained forever unknown to us? This happened, we are told, in eastern Germany; but in our own island, less than a hundred years ago, there remained at least one cat fit to be the ministrant of a sorceress. When Sir Walter Scott visited the Black Dwarf, “Bowed Davie Ritchie,” the Dwarf said, “Man *hae ye ony poo’r?*” meaning power of a supernatural kind, and he added solemnly, pointing to a large black cat whose fiery eyes shone in a dark corner of the cottage, “HE *has poo’r!*” In Scott’s place any imaginative person would have more than half believed Davie, as indeed did his illustrious visitor. The ancient

Egyptians, who knew as much about magic as the wisest of the moderns, certainly believed that the cat had *poor*, or they would not have mummified him with such painstaking conscientiousness. It may easily be imagined, that in times when science did not exist, a creature whose fur emitted lightnings when anybody rubbed it in the dark, must have inspired great awe, and there is really an air of mystery about cats which considerably exercises the imagination. This impression would be intensified in the case of people born with a physical antipathy to cats, and there are such persons. A Captain Logan, of Knockshinnoch in Ayrshire, is mentioned in one of the early numbers of *Chambers' Journal* as having this antipathy in the strongest form. He simply could not endure the sight of cat or kitten, and though a tall, strong man, would do anything to escape from the objects of his instinctive and uncontrollable horror, climbing upon chairs if a cat entered the room, and not daring to come down till the creature was removed from his presence. These mysterious repugnances are outside the domain of reason. Many people, not without courage, are seized with involuntary shudderings when they see a snake or a toad; others could not bring themselves to touch a rat, though the rat is one of the cleanliest of animals—not, certainly, as to his food, but his person. It may be presumed that one Mrs. Griggs, who lived, I believe, in Edinburgh, did not share Captain Logan's antipathy, for she kept in her house no less than eighty-six living cats, and had, besides, twenty-eight dead ones in glass cases, immortalized by the art of the taxidermist. If it is true, and it certainly is so in a great measure, that those who love most know most, then Mrs. Griggs would have been a much more competent person to write on cats than the cold-minded author

of these chapters. It is wonderful to think how much that good lady must have known of the *loveableness* of cats, of those recondite qualities which may endear them to the human heart!

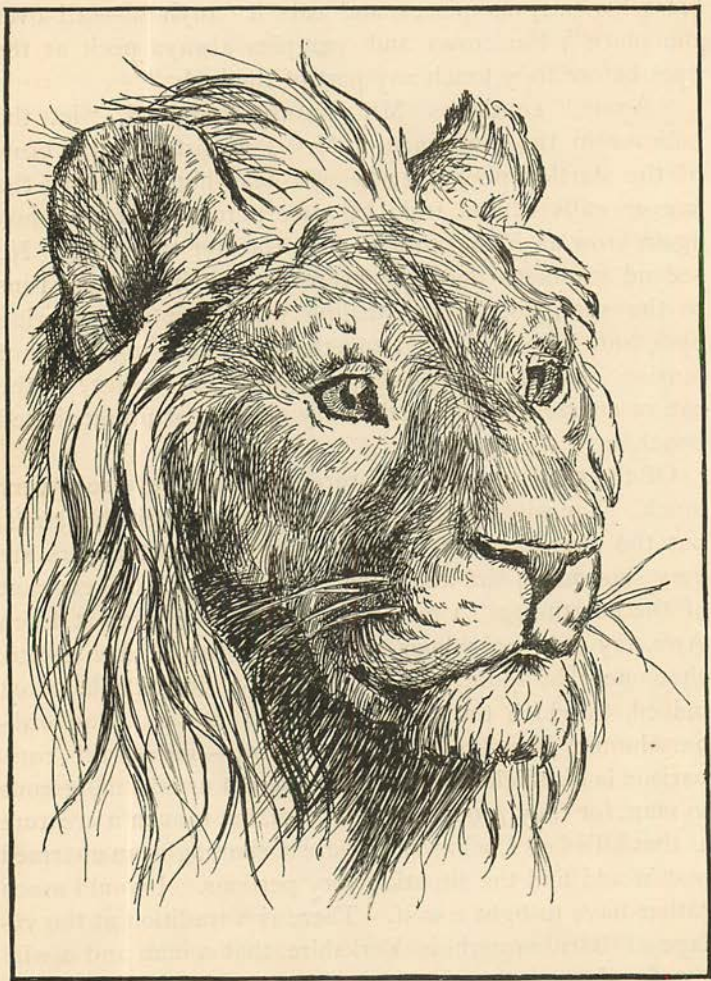
What a difference in knowledge and feeling concerning cats between Mrs. Griggs and a gamekeeper! The gamekeeper knows a good deal about them too, but it is not exactly affection which has given keenness to *his* observation. He does not see a "dear sweet pet" in every cat that crosses his woodland path, but the most destructive of poachers, the worst of "vermin." And there can be no doubt that from his point of view the gamekeeper is quite right, even as good Mrs. Griggs may have been from hers. If cats killed game from hunger only, there would be a limit to their depredations, but unfortunately they have the instinct of sport, which sportsmen consider a very admirable quality in themselves, but regard with the strongest disapprobation in other animals. Mr. Frank Buckland says, that when once a cat has acquired the passion for hunting it becomes so strong that it is impossible to break him of it. He knew a cat which had been condemned to death, but the owner begged its life on condition that it should be shut up every night and well fed. The very first night of its incarceration it escaped up the chimney, and was found the next morning, black with soot, in one of the gamekeeper's traps. The keeper easily determines what kind of animal has been committing depredations in his absence. "Every animal has his own way of killing and eating his prey. The cat always turns the skin *inside out*, leaving the same reversed like a glove. The weasel and stoat will eat the brain and nibble about the head, and suck the blood. The fox will always leave the legs and hinder parts of a hare or a rabbit; the dog

tears his prey to pieces, and eats it 'anyhow—all over the place'; the crows and magpies always peck at the eyes before they touch any part of the body."

"Again," continues Mr. Frank Buckland, "let the believer in the innocence of Mrs. Puss listen to the crow of the startled pheasant; he will hear him 'tree,' as the keeper calls it, and from his safe perch up in a branch again crow as if to summon his protector to his aid. No second summons does the keeper want; he at once runs to the spot, and there, stealing with erect ears, glaring eyes, and limbs collected together, and at a high state of tension, ready for the fatal spring, he sees—what?—the cat, of course, caught in the very attitude of premeditated poaching." . . .

Of the cat in a state of nature few of us have seen very much. The wild cat has become rare in the British islands, but the specimens shot occasionally by gamekeepers are very superior in size and strength to the familiar occupant of the hearth-rug. I remember that when I lived at Loch Awe, my next neighbour, a keeper on the Cladich estate, shot one that quite astonished me—a formidable beast indeed, to which the largest domestic cat was as an ordinary human being to Chang the giant—indeed this comparison is insufficient. Wild cats are not usually dangerous to man, for they prudently avoid him, but if such a creature as that killed on Lochaweside were to show fight, an unarmed man would find the situation very perilous. I would much rather have to fight a wolf. There is a tradition at the village of Barnborough, in Yorkshire, that a man and a wild cat fought together in a wood near there, and that the combat went on till they got to the church-porch, when

Chang was a famous Chinese giant who travelled all over the world exhibiting himself.



THE KING OF THE BEASTS.

Pen drawing by E. H. Saunders, after Ernest van Muyden.

both died from their wounds. It is the marvellous agility of the cat which makes him such a terrible enemy; to say that he "flies" at you is scarcely a figure of speech. However, the wild cat, when he knows that he is observed, generally seeks refuge, as King Charles did at Boscobel, in the leafy shelter of some shadowy tree, and there the deadly leaden hail too surely follows him, and brings him to earth again.

Cats have the advantage of being very highly connected, since the king of beasts is their blood-relation, and it is certain that a good deal of the interest we take in them is due to this august relationship. What the merlin or the sparrow-hawk is to the golden eagle, the cat is to the great felines of the tropics. The difference between a domestic cat and a tiger is scarcely wider than that which separates a miniature pet dog from a bloodhound. It is becoming to the dignity of an African prince, like Theodore of Abyssinia, to have lions for his household pets. The true grandeur and majesty of a brave man are rarely seen in such visible supremacy as when he sits surrounded by these terrible creatures, he in his fearlessness, they in their awe; he in his defenceless weakness, they with that mighty strength which they dare not use against him. One of my friends, distinguished alike in literature and science, but not at all the sort of person, apparently, to command respect from brutes who cannot estimate intellectual greatness, had one day an interesting conversation with a lion-tamer, which ended in a still more interesting experiment. The lion-tamer affirmed that there was no secret in his profession, that *real* courage alone was neces-

The story of the escape of King Charles II. of England is told in Sir W. Scott's "Woodstock"; and in Harrison Ainsworth's "Boscobel or the Royal Oak."

sary, and that any one who had the genuine gift of courage could safely enter the cage along with him. "For example, you yourself, sir," added the lion-tamer, "if you have the sort of courage I mean, may go into the cage with me whenever you like." On this my friend, who has a fine intellectual coolness and unbounded scientific curiosity, willingly accepted the offer, and paid a visit to their majesties the lions in the privacy of their own apartment. They received him with the politeness due to a brave man, and after an agreeable interview of several minutes he backed out of the royal presence with the gratified feelings of a gentleman who has just been presented at court.



BENGAL TIGER.

Pen drawing by E. H. Saunders, after Ernest van Muyden.