

A LION-KEEPER AT LEISURE:

A TALK WITH SETH SUTTON.

BY JOHN HYDE.



SETH SUTTON, for more than forty years in the employment of the Zoological Society as keeper of the large carnivora, has now sought a well-earned retirement, but he kindly con-

sented to become a public man once more for an hour or two when a representative of the WINDSOR MAGAZINE recently called on him for the purpose of hearing his experiences.

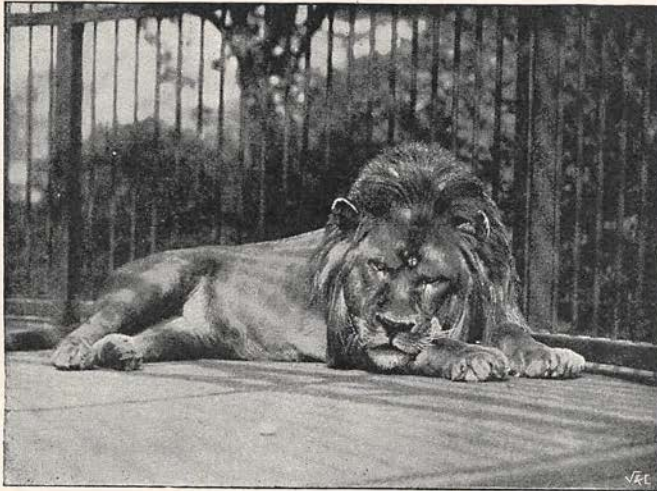
Sutton, though his days at the Zoo are over, still lives within a stone's throw of the place where he so successfully managed the largest and fiercest of the animals that are the delight and terror of sight-seeing London. He is probably one of the best known personages in the locality; so well known, indeed, that everybody can indicate where he lives, although, curiously enough, some who know his whereabouts are unacquainted with his precise address. I inquired for him first at the Gardens. The courteous official smiled. "I can't give you Sutton's exact address," he said, "but I can easily direct you to his house. You take such a turning and such a turning, and then anyone will show you the house." I did so, and finally was brought up to the door of Sutton's cottage by a bevy of small boys, who grinned knowingly when I asked for the old official. In another minute I was face to face with the grand old lion-keeper himself.

Then began diplomatic relations. The situation was just a little strained, for Sutton had a strong feeling that the Press had been

too urgent in its claims for his reminiscences. "I think I've told everything already," he said; "and now that I've left the society's service I don't think I ought to meddle with their affairs, for my duty in the Gardens was the society's affair."

But the WINDSOR representative was persuasive. "Perhaps so," he assented, "but your experiences are your own affair, Sutton, to give away if you choose; and then the

world has surely some claim on such interesting stories as you have to tell." Sutton, shrewd old East Anglian that he is, gradually admitted the claim of the world in general, and of the WINDSOR MAGAZINE in particular; so it was not long before he relaxed and con-



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"DUKE."

[McLellan.

sented to talk about his big pets and their ways.

First, however, he told the interviewer a little of his history.

"You entered the Gardens comparatively young, I think?"

"It's more than forty years ago," he said reflectively. "I'm just turned sixty-eight. I was born in the parish of Topcroft, in Norfolkshire, and as a lad had to do with domestic animals, but I saw no chance of getting on in the country, so I thought I'd come up to London to try my luck." Sutton, by the way, still speaks the dialect of his county, which we will not try to reproduce. His two score years in the metropolis have in no way made him a Londoner.

"Well," he continued, "I got a place in the Zoo. No, not with the beasts at first; it

was a labourer's place; but afterwards I became a keeper, and had three years with the bears. The most part of my life I had charge of the lions, tigers, and leopards."

"Had you long hours?"

"In summer they were pretty long, sometimes about twelve hours; in winter of course they were shorter, as the Gardens close earlier. No, I hadn't night duty, except once or twice sitting up with a sick lion or tiger. And then of course, I'm forgetting, I was two years watchman. Ah, that was a cold, lonesome job!"

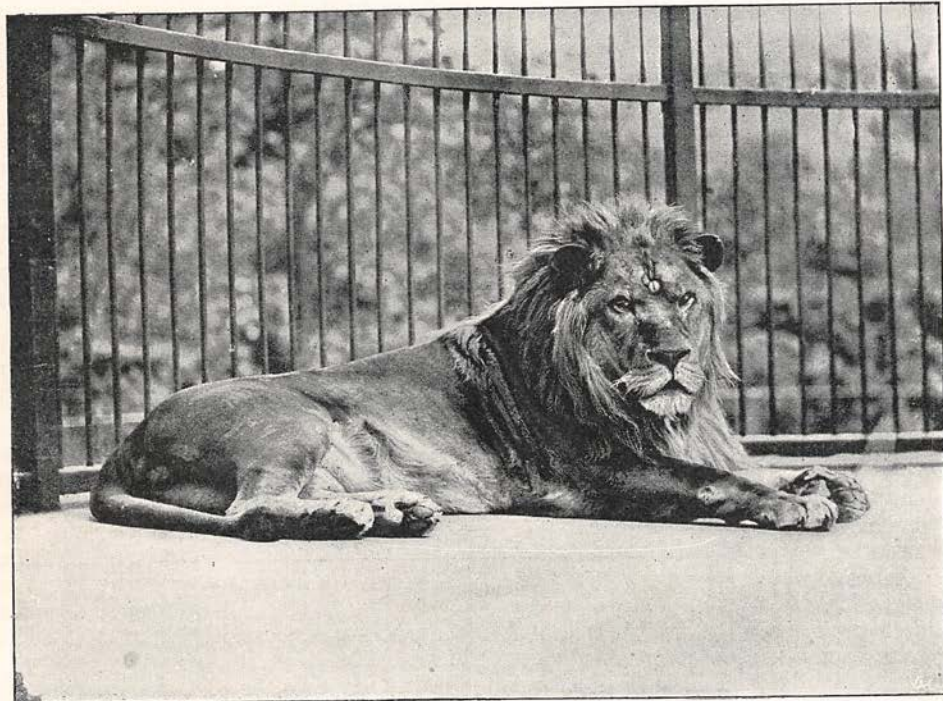
"Were you single-handed?"

"No, there are two night watchmen. The

"Yes, on the whole, I did. You see a bear may be friendly enough when it's a cub, but a full-grown bear is always unsafe to handle. A Polar bear you can never tame. A man never really gets the better of a Polar."

"Then how did you deal with your big cats—the lions and tigers?"

"Someone has said that I treated lions and tigers like dogs, and lionesses, tigresses, leopards and pumas like cats. I never would touch a lioness with the hand, and the leopards very seldom. I did touch that snow-leopard, though," he corrected, pointing out a fine photograph on the wall. "That's 'Motir.'



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"VICTOR."

[F. G. O. Stuart.

duty is just to walk round, seeing that everything is right and keeping up the fires. I didn't enjoy it at all. I preferred keeper's duty."

"What was the secret of your success with the large carnivora?"

"Well, just keeping quiet. I went about them slowly and never flustered them in any way with a sudden motion or noise. If a tiger didn't want to move I never forced it. They don't forgive you if you do."

"Did you prefer the lions and tigers to the bears?"

It was as friendly as friendly; really a nice leopard. Look at its beautiful tail there—just like two Persian cats! But the black leopards were never safe."

"How many animals had you under your care?"

"The number would vary; latterly I'd twenty-eight. I saw every night and morning to the shifting of the beasts to and from night and day quarters, and did everything for them myself, prepared food, nursed the sick, and so on, in the passage behind the dens. Then I superintended the transfer to

the outdoor runs in summer as well. I always received new arrivals myself. Sometimes they were unwilling to come out of the box they'd come home in, but I just let them take their time. The most difficult job I ever had was with a black leopard."

"Were not new arrivals a great anxiety to you?"

"Yes, they were a bit troublesome. You see on the voyage home they have most likely been either starved or overfed. Now and then we would get an animal that was almost ruined. I remember a poor young tiger that came some years ago from the back regions of China. It had been half starved for a long time, and so had grown out of all proportion, or rather it hadn't grown at all, except in the head, which was full-sized when it arrived. The body, however, was only about the size of a small retriever. Its coat, which should have been long and furry, was wretched to look at. It seemed a hopeless case, but it was a good-natured little beast, so I tried what I could do with it. Its jaws were too weak to crack large bones so we gave it boiled mutton and bone-dust. The bone-dust was to strengthen its frame. In a short time its body began to improve, but then its hair dropped off entirely, except that on the head and face. Then we tried rubbing in sulphur, and bit by bit the coat improved. At last we were able to exhibit it, really well-grown and with healthy fur, in the front cages. But after a month or two it took ill with some internal complaint, and in spite of all we could do it died. Yes," said Sutton with a regretful shake of the head, "I was sorry, for it would have made really a nice tiger. It was very tame and affectionate. When I came near it it would purr just like a cat and go burr-burr-burr like this," and Sutton imitated the noise with his lips. "A good many of my animals used to do that," he added. It is noticeable that to pronounce an animal "nice" seems to be Sutton's highest certificate of dumb excellence.

"There was another amusing case of a young tiger," the old keeper went on, "but this one was overfed, not starved. It was sent home from a gentleman in India in charge of a friend. This caretaker thought the greatest kindness he could show the tiger was to stuff it, and when I got it at the Gardens you never saw such a sight; its body was like two tigers, and its poor legs, being too weak to support it, were like this"; as he spoke Sutton laid his hands on the table and bent each of his arms into an arch. "Yes," said the keeper, chuckling at the

comical recollection, "that was like it. I asked the gentleman—he was rather a young one—what sort of way that was to use a tiger, and he thought me rather unfeeling. 'Now,' I said, 'I'm going to put the tiger to run with two young lions.' 'What,' says he, 'they'll kill him!' 'Oh, not at all,' says I. 'Do you think I'm going to take up another cage with the like of him? Although he is the size of a couple of young tigers he won't be that way long with me.' So the gentleman went away sad-like. In a week or two he came back with his father, and I took them to see the tiger, that was runnin' nicely with the two lions. 'Oh, you poor, miserable little beast,' says he—'poor, miserable little beast, have they brought you to this?' Then he turns to me, saying, 'What do you mean by starving him like this?' I said, 'By the time you come back I hope to have him about half his present size, and then he'll be getting about right.' The young gentleman was quite angry. 'I'll speak to the society,' says he. But his father said, 'Hold your tongue. Do you think *he* doesn't know how to treat tigers a lot better than you do?'"

"Did you ever meet with any serious accident?"

"Never with the lions or tigers or bears, but I once was pretty badly shaken up by a zebra."

"Would it be too painful to tell me how it happened?"

"Oh, I'll tell you if you like. The zebra was savage—everybody about the place knew that—and we kept clear of him as much as possible. He used to be turned out into a yard while his fodder was brought in, proper precautions being taken, of course, to prevent his getting at the keeper. Between his stall and the yard was a sliding door which it was the duty of one man to fasten when the zebra was turned out. Well, one day the zebra was put out as usual, and this door, instead of being fastened, was merely pushed to. I was in the stall putting fresh hay into the manger, when the zebra heard me. Up it came to the door. I looked round and saw its muzzle come to the opening, for the door was not only not fastened, but wasn't pushed perfectly close to the post. The zebra pushed at the opening, got its nose in, and in a twinkling had slid the door back, using its nose like a wedge. The next moment it was on me. In it ran, bent its head and caught me on the leg just below the knee. I was on my back before I knew where I was, kicking away all I knew with

my free foot ; but the brute stuck to my leg like grim death, and bit so hard that it cracked the shin bone. Help soon came, and the other keepers drove the zebra off with their stable forks."

"Were you badly hurt?"

"I was laid up for thirteen weeks from the bite. But beyond this I never had a single accident."

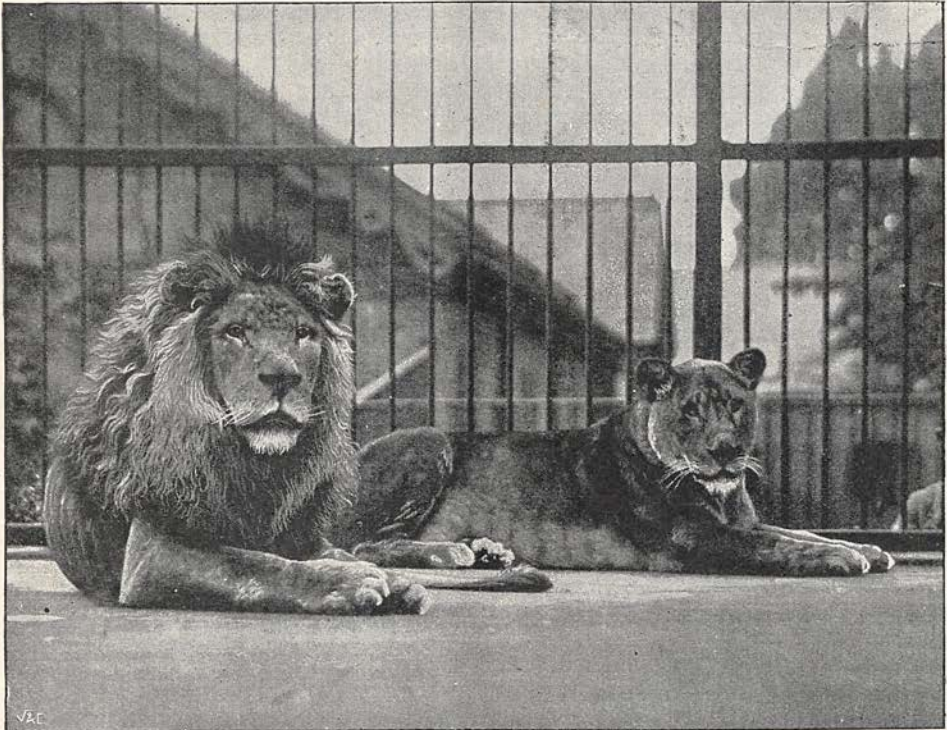
"You must have studied the habits of your animals very closely to get such an intimate knowledge of how to deal with them."

"Yes, I did watch them pretty closely, and

wants to ask for a pension, and I got it at once. Others have stayed on and on, but I thought I might have a little rest and live out my time in peace—if," he added with a good-humoured twinkle, "the newspaper men would only allow me to."

"These are pictures of your pets," I remarked, indicating the photographs on the wall of Sutton's snug little parlour.

"Yes," he said, with a touch of something as near enthusiasm as this calm, deliberate old master of man-eaters can rise to ; "that's old 'Prince,' the African lion, he's dead now,



From a photo by]

"PRINCE" AND "NANCY."

[A. Howard Bertram.

bit by bit I got a "way" with them that they seemed to like and understand."

"Probably you know as much about the treatment of caged animals as any man living?"

"Well, I shouldn't wonder," said Sutton modestly. "About the animals in their wild state I can't know much, of course, not having been abroad, but I've done a good bit of reading in my time. As for the caged animals—well, I do understand them a bit. Forty years is a long time. If a man hasn't earned his pension then I don't know when he has. I was the first of the society's ser-

and on the other wall there you've his wife, 'Nancy.' That great tiger in the middle is 'Tommy,' brought home from India by the Prince of Wales and presented to the Zoological Society. Oh yes, 'Tommy' was a nice tiger, not hard to deal with. Next to him is 'Motir,' the snow-leopard that I told you about. I liked him best of all perhaps. He was sent home by an Indian lady. That again," said Sutton with a quiet chuckle, "is the tigress 'Minnie.'" He pointed to a splendid photograph representing the animal with head tossed back and jaws opened in full roar—a truly fiendish spectacle. Sutton

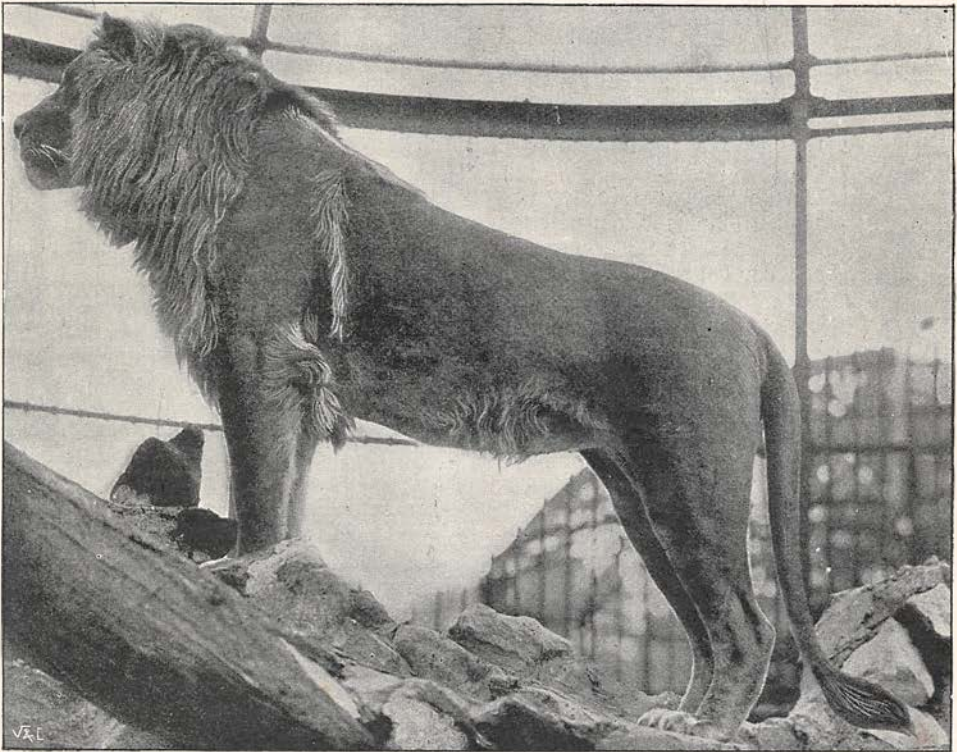
chuckled again, so I turned inquiringly towards him. "See what's written beneath?" he said; so I looked at the corner of the photograph and read the legend, "Ha, ha, I've eaten the keeper!" The boast was certainly appropriate to the tiger's expression; but for Sutton the humour of it seemed to lie in the fact that he is alive to show the picture, and also that he was the only one who could make "Minnie" show her teeth in the aforesaid villainous fashion. "When I'd be passing the cage," he confessed, "I'd throw up my hand so"—he made a threatening gesture—"and then 'Minnie' would show her teeth and growl as you see there."

This led us to talk of that less scientific

though more flashy form of lion-taming to be seen in travelling menageries and circuses, where foolhardy persons enter the cages and put the wild beast through various performances. Of this Sutton, as a truly scientific man, expressed his deep disapproval—more especially in the case of women performers did he speak scathingly of the practice. "They all put their heads in the lion's mouth once too often," he said judiciously, in a tone that implied, "and serve 'em right too."

"That sort of lion-tamer doesn't earn his pension," I suggested.

"No," said Sutton with a slow *crescendo* chuckle. "No, they usually don't stay long enough!"



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