

MY ADVENTURE WITH A LION.

BY HERMAN RAVE.



LONG before I became a citizen of A—, I had been a keeper in a menagerie for a season, and successfully bullied the lions and tigers under my care. So it was little wonder that, while we were all gathered at the armory one evening, I should boast a little of my ability to handle wild animals.

The boys laughed incredulously, and one of them suggested that I ought to go to C—, where a circus had been wrecked and the tigers and lions had escaped; it would give me a chance to demonstrate my powers.

"Perhaps he needn't go there," remarked our corporal. "Some of the brutes may stray over this way."

There seemed to be little likelihood of such an event, yet after we had parted and I walked home through the shaded streets, where the electric lights and trees made queer shadows, the corporal's remark insisted upon coming back again and again, and by the time I turned the latch-key and let myself into the house, it seemed not near so foolish a speech as when first heard; indeed, I looked around in quick alarm at a soft pit-a-patting sound behind me, and there was a sense of relief when it proved to be only the footstep of a vagrant dog.

I went to bed, thinking of wrecked circuses, roaming lions and tigers, and it was small wonder that processions of wild animals moved through my dreams.

Once, when I woke up with a start after some unusually disagreeable play of fancy, I wished the corporal's remark and all the circuses at the bottom of the sea. But the vagaries of these dreams were to be topped off by something more realistic.

Shortly after midnight I was startled by loud, urgent knocking, and the sound of some one ringing the door-bell and at the same time pounding upon the door as if trying to burst it open. The people of the house had been awakened, and were running down-stairs to see

what was the matter. I heard the street-door opened and voices talking in the hall; then my name was called, and, hurriedly dressing, I ran down-stairs, fearing some great disaster.

It was the corporal. By the dim, greenish light of the hall-lamp his face looked positively ghastly with fright. His shoes were dusty, as if he had walked along the middle of the street, and his clothing had been hastily thrown on—he was not dressed.

For a moment I looked at him in amazement. There certainly was no fire; the streets were too quiet. Had some crime been committed? But no!

"Those confounded lions of that Van Dander show are in town! They've been seen by a number of persons and the whole town is afraid of being eaten up! Can you catch them?"

Could I catch them? As if it were a matter of a couple of domestic kittens. The question tickled me in its supreme absurdity, and I burst into a fit of laughter. Could I catch them? Of course I couldn't! More likely they could catch me!

"But you said that you had handled lions."

"Yes; in a cage, well-fed, and by daylight. But this is quite a different matter!"

"Oh," exclaimed the corporal in a tone of disgust, "I thought it was all brag, that talk of yours. Then we'll have to hunt them down and shoot them. Good-night!"

"Hold on; where are you going?" I cried, stung by his remark.

"To the armory."

"Well, wait till I get my rifle and I'll go along. Perhaps I may be of some service anyhow."

In a moment I procured the weapon and as we stepped from the house I noticed that the corporal picked up a heavy rifle at the door.

We kept the middle of the streets, reconnoitering carefully and holding our guns in readiness. However, beyond the fantastic shadows cast by the electric light, nothing was to be seen. The streets were absolutely deserted.

At the armory several of the members of the company were gathered, and

as we entered they received us with a volley of questions.

Had we seen anything? Had we heard anything? No? What had better be done then? etc., etc.

The armory was a long, low wooden building. One large room occupied its entire width. At the farther end a couple of dressing-rooms had been partitioned off, and there also stood a billiard-table and a couple of benches.

I walked toward the table and, lying down upon it, with my eyes turned toward the door, called the boys up for a consultation, for they appeared to expect me to act as leader.

They stood around me and listened for what I would say, but before a word could escape my lips our eyes were turned to the door. It was slowly very slowly opening.

A strange spell held us bound, gazing at the moving door. No one spoke.

Suddenly the black and yellow muzzle of a gigantic lion was thrust through the opening. There was a cry of terror from the men, a scampering flight, and I was left alone to confront the terrible brute.

There was absolutely no chance for flight had I wished it, though I did not. A strange, horrible fascination was upon me. The blazing eyes of the brute seemed to hold me with a mesmeric influence, from which I could not withdraw.

He had now come entirely inside, and stood eyeing me steadily. What a magnificent animal he was! His maned front grand and kingly, his body and limbs massive, yet supple, his lashing tail sinuously graceful.

For a moment—what a moment!—he stood thus facing me, as if taking my measure and in evident doubt whether to attack me forthwith or first to explore the place.

He seemed to conclude that I was securely penned, and his fierce eyes left mine to look curiously at the flaming gas-jets. It was but a second, yet it saved me, for my will-power reasserted itself, and everything in me rallied to the contest for life, which was sure to come, and which must utterly depend upon my nerve.

I raised myself slightly, and the movement attracted the lion's attention. Slowly his gaze dropped from the contemplation of the gas-jets. His eyes

sought mine, and with catlike caution and certainty he crawled forward quivering, with a slow, sinuous movement of the body, till he crouched within three yards of me. But I had shaken off that fearful numbing influence, and had steadily met the blazing fury of his eyes with the cold, stern assertion of human will. His quivering ceased. He crouched motionless. In silence we gazed at each other, how long I cannot tell, for in that terrible and supreme battle of human will against brute instinct every sense in me was merged in the silent, intense effort to compel my foe to lower his eyes and acknowledge me his master. I felt that I should conquer. Fear gave way to a savage feeling of recklessness and exultation.

My eyes did not waver, and the tawny fire of his orbs tried at last to shrink away from me, but in vain. I had won, and now I would not let the cowed brute drop his eyes, but held him with a power as inexplicable to myself as it was to him.

His limbs relaxed their rigid tension, and awkwardly he tried to back away from a fear he did not understand. Had I let him go he would have slunk into the street like a whipped cur; but I, thought of the sleeping town.

Without changing my attitude or removing my eyes, I called softly to the corporal. He answered, and I heard a door creak behind me. The lion started, but the authority of my look still held him.

"Quick, corporal!" I whispered, "take true aim—straight into the lion's eye. Shoot, and shoot true; for heaven's sake, shoot true!"

For answer there was the sharp click of a gun-lock. It broke the spell which had held the brute, and with a terrific roar he raised himself to meet the new foe, then crouched for the spring. Vainly I tried to catch his eyes. Would the corporal never shoot! I felt then the fearful agony of suspense and death!

Ah! A sharp crash, a reverberating roar, the hurtling of a tawny mass against and over me—and I awoke from the most awful dream of my life to find my mastiff cuddling his affectionate head against my face.

The Van Dander lions never came to our town.