

The Reverend Wood visits the zoo

Anthony Lee

John George Wood was the David Attenborough of his day. Before Wood, natural history was seen as uninteresting and dry, a matter of simply putting animals and plants into classes; after Wood the emphasis was on the behaviour of animals, a topic of much wider general interest. With little formal training in science, Wood became one of foremost Victorian popularizers of science.¹ And much of his knowledge of natural history was gained in Margate, at the sea shore and at the Zoological Gardens.²

Wood was born in 1827, the son of a surgeon.² He studied at Oxford with the intention of entering the church, graduating in 1848. In 1852 he became curate of the parish of St. Thomas the Martyr in a poor part of Oxford. His son tells that he found his stipend as a member of the clergy too low, at no more than £60 per year, and so looked for ways of improving his prospects.² In 1851 he had published a book, *The Illustrated Natural History*, which met with sales which although 'not phenomenal' were at least felt to be 'encouraging' by both the author and the publisher.² In 1856 he became chaplain of St. Bartholomew's Hospital London, where he remained for 6 years, in a job where his duties 'were not arduous' giving him plenty of time to pursue his literary career. In 1857, Messrs. Routledge & Co. had the idea of publishing a series of shilling *Handbooks on Natural History* and asked Wood to write a book for the series. This he agreed to, producing *Common Objects of the Sea-shore*. The book sold well, leading to a second book for the series, *Common Objects of the Country*, which appeared in 1858. This was a spectacular success; the publishers had printed a first edition of one hundred thousand copies, but these sold out by the end of just the first week, to be followed by many subsequent editions. Between 1868 and 1876 Wood was precentor to the Canterbury Diocesan Choral Union. After 1876 he devoted himself to writing books and lecturing on zoology. His sketch lectures, as he called them, made him very popular both in the United Kingdom and in the United States; he illustrated the lectures with drawings on a black-board or on large sheets of paper with coloured crayons, a foretaste perhaps of the famous Australian, Rolf Harris. In 1878 Wood moved to Upper Norwood, where he lived until his death in 1889.

It is not clear when Wood first visited Margate. We know that he visited frequently after his marriage in 1859, visits made because of his own poor health and that of his wife,² but it is very likely that he visited before this. His 1857 book, *Common Objects of the Sea-shore*, was based on 'visits to the sea-coasts for the last six or seven years,'³ and although in the book he does not mention any specific places, we know Wood was in Margate soon after the publication of the book since his son relates the following incident:



The Rev. John George Wood

Soon after its publication, he was hard at work among the rock-pools at Margate, a mallet and a chisel in his hand, his oldest coat on, and his trousers tucked up to his knees. Just as he was moving from one pool to another, a small company of fashionably dressed young ladies approached, deeply intent upon a copy of his own "Common Objects." Just as they passed they looked up, saw the enthusiastic naturalist in his working attire, shrugged their shoulders, elevated their noses, and murmured, "How very disgusting!" And then they returned to their book."²

Wood frequently came back to the topic of the sea shore, and in 1862 he published an article *Along the Margate Sands* in *The Boy's Own Magazine*.⁴ Whilst agreeing that 'Margate is by no means one of the localities which is celebrated for the production of marine rarities' he felt that

no one who has a pair of eyes that can see two yards in front of them, and a decently competent brain behind them, need find himself in lack of amusement and instruction as he strolls along the Margate sands. For myself, I like them, and spend many hours in pottering about them with bare feet and legs, and with an apparent absence of any purpose. And purpose I have none, but just look about and wait for something to present itself. I have spent the whole of this

morning standing in two little pools some ten or twelve feet in diameter, and at most a foot in depth. The strollers on the sands and the clamberers among the seaweed-clad rocks cannot make out my object. I have no basket, no bottle, no pail, and no net, and when a curious person comes up and looks into the sandy pool he sees nothing at all, and goes away again, thinking me somewhat idiotic. Yet I have been greatly interested and amused for several consecutive hours. I have been watching the prawns and their manners and customs, and find them to be much more intelligent and full of purpose than I had previously imagined.

After rather a lot about prawns, he turns to the crabs:

With a few exceptions the crab is the master of the shore, and a large, hard-shelled green crab must be as despotic as a Kaffir chief, who is certainly the most complete specimen of an earthly despot. But he has one dreaded enemy, from whom he is never safe unless he is under the sand or deep in the water. Just as the dark chief in question may be attacked and killed by a wild beast, so may the crab be captured by a rat. The rocks above high-water mark are thickly inhabited with rats. You can see their footmarks in the sand, and trace them as far as the entrance to their habitations. Beyond there is no chance of tracing them, for the clefts in which they live have so many ramifications that if the animal should be traced into one, he can always escape by another.

On one occasion, when a friend and myself were walking under the cliffs, we saw the fresh footprints of a rat, accompanied by strange marks which we could not comprehend. After spending some little time in investigation, the whole mystery was disclosed. Only a few minutes before our arrival at the spot, a rat sallied from the cliffs and attacked a large crab that was making its way to the sea. The crab had shown fight, and struggled violently, but the superior force of its enemy prevailed, and it had been dragged towards the cliff, its hook-like feet making furrows in the sand, and a slight groove being traced by the tail of the rat. In many clefts of the rock, limbs and other portions of crabs may be seen, showing that the rats have been successful in their raid, and have devoured the animal that has devoured so many lesser creatures.

The other great attraction of Margate for Wood was the menagerie kept by Lord George Sanger, to which Wood was a frequent visitor. 'Indeed' wrote his son, 'While he was at home, he very seldom let a week pass without paying at least one visit to his favorite animals.'²² The menagerie was part of the Hall-by-the-Sea, located on a site later occupied by Dreamland. The Hall-by-the-Sea originated as the terminus of the London, Chatham & Dover Railway Company. Due to a disagreement with the South Eastern Railway Company, who had already built their terminus on the sea front at Margate, the LCDR were ordered to vacate their terminus and rebuild on a site further away from the town. The vacated terminus was rented by the LCDR in 1867 to Spiers and Ponds, a major catering contractor of the time. They ran The Hall-by-the-Sea as a dance and concert hall, but without any great success. So, in 1870, they sold it to the then Mayor of Margate, Alderman Thomas Dalby Reeve, a prominent local business man. Reeve's son Arthur married Harriett Sanger, daughter of Lord George Sanger in 1873 and in 1874, Sanger took over the Hall. With the Hall came a lot of land, including a number of potato fields, with the unused railway embankment running right through the centre.^{5,6}

Sanger describes how he 'went down to Margate, bought half-a-dozen bundles of wood, and pegged out the gardens and menagerie houses.'⁷

In May 1874, Sanger advertised that the Hall-by-the-Sea, Italian and Zoological Gardens at Margate would open for the season, from Whit Monday, May 25th. He reported that 'The magnificent Hall has been considerably enlarged in such a manner as to meet the requirements of the largest quantity of visitors; whilst no expense has been spared in refitting and decorating in the most *recherché* and elegant style.'⁸ He added:

The Management beg respectfully to call attention to Italian and Zoological Gardens. Neither money, trouble, or taste has been spared in making these the most enjoyable Promenade by the Sea-side. The aid of Flora has been successfully invoked, and principal treasures in Trees, Shrubs, Plants, Flowers, and Statuary are represented.

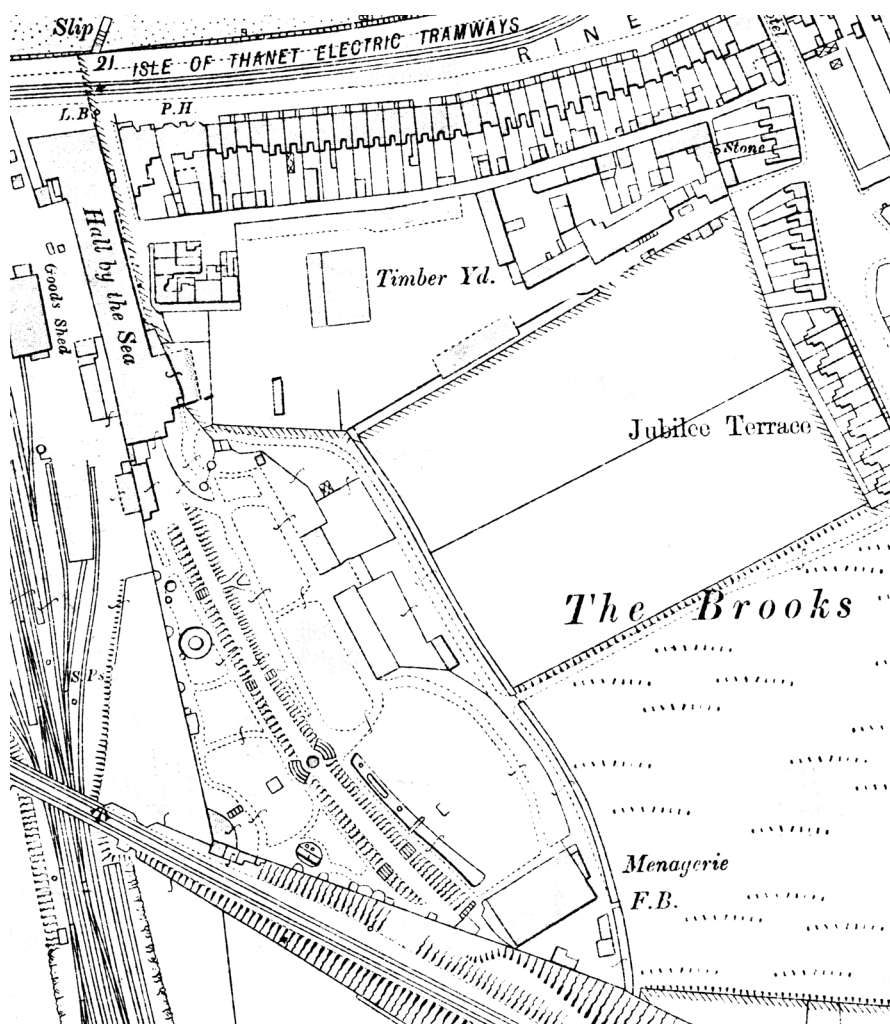
The Zoological Collection will comprise specimens of the most varied kind, and will constantly receive important additions of all kinds of birds and beasts.

Sanger's various shows required large numbers of animals; in 1882, for example, it was reported that 'the combined establishment (circus and menagerie) consists of forty-four carriages, 166 horses and ponies, twelve elephants, six camels and dromedaries, and a cage of eight lions. The staff employed consists of about 180 people.'⁹ The Hall-by-the-Sea was to be Sanger's headquarters and the menagerie was to house the sick animals and those animals not actually being used in the shows. For the first eight or nine years the Hall-by-the-Sea ran at a loss of £3,000 to £5,000 a year, before Sanger finally made it 'one of the best-known and best paying concerns in the United Kingdom.'⁷

The grounds were entered through an arched gateway at the bottom of a slope by the side of the Hall. The gateway was 'of novel design, being a representation of the ruins of old Margate Abbey,'¹⁰ an establishment as bogus as Sanger's title. The animal house was at the extreme end of the gardens, 'heated by means of hot pipes.'⁹ By 1876, the animal collection included lions, camels, leopards, a Bengal tiger, cranes and jackasses.^{11,12}

It was originally intended that the gardens would contain a large aquarium near the garden entrance to the Hall, 'constructed in artistic rock-work' and containing ten tanks for fish.^{10,12} Although the aquarium seems to have been built, it was apparently never used, as, when electric lighting was introduced into the Hall-by-the-Sea in 1881, the generator was housed 'in the building in the grounds which was originally intended to be used as an aquarium.'¹³ Of the 16 lights, of 2,000 candle power each, 'five were in the hall, one in the restaurant, one in the entrance, three on a column in the front of the building, four in the gardens, and two in the menagerie. The lights will be shaded with an alabaster globe, so as to give a softer and more diffused light, as the clear light would be too glaring for the eyes.'

In 1881, a large new Menagerie, 150 ft. by 60 ft., took the place of the old building; it was a brick-built structure with 23 cages, with floors about 4 ft. from the ground.¹⁴ 'The den at the eastern end is the whole width of the menagerie, and



The Hall-by-the-Sea, 1907. The entrance to the grounds was by a slope to the right of the Hall-by-the-Sea. On the right of the slope were the six cottages (Hall-by-the-Sea Terrace) where some of the workers lived. The old unused railway embankment in the centre of the grounds is clear. The menagerie is at the end of the grounds, fronted by a large central area, with a 'water feature' on the left, parallel to the embankment.

those at each corner, under conical roofs, are for the larger animals – camels, elephants, etc.; in the centre is placed the aviary, the roof being supported by carved columns.' 'The new menagerie is an extensive building, and has been erected from designs by and under the direction of Mr Arthur Reeve. There is a large increase in the number and variety of animals exhibited.'¹⁵

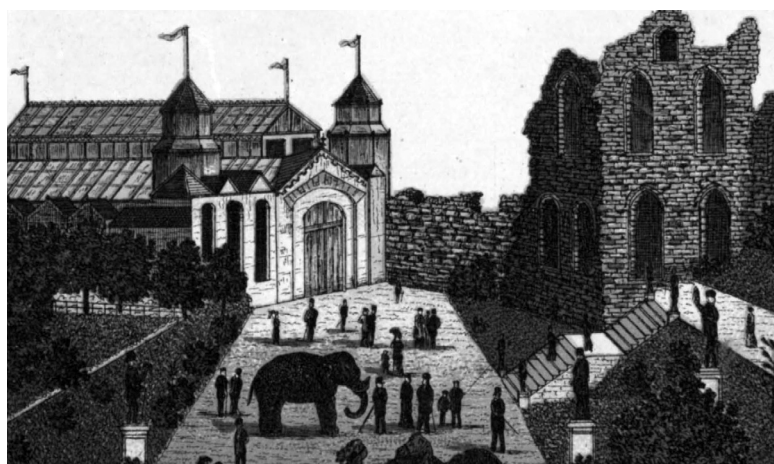
A catalogue of the period lists the content of the 23 cages in the *In-door Menagerie*.¹⁶ As well as the lionesses Victoria and Empress, the lion Nero and Tigress Eugene, there were leopards, hyenas, kangaroos, camels, an Indian elephant, a Himalayan bear, a chimpanzee, various other animals, and one cage containing over sixty monkeys. An *Open Air Menagerie* housed nine cages, with wolves, an American brown bear,

a Polar bear, a seal, and some birds. *The Round House* contained a Russian brown bear, another American brown bear, a giant sloth, and various birds, in ten cages. The *Aviaries on the Lawn* contained nine cages of birds and a cage containing Alpacas. The *Aviaries on the Esplanade* contained eleven cages of birds.

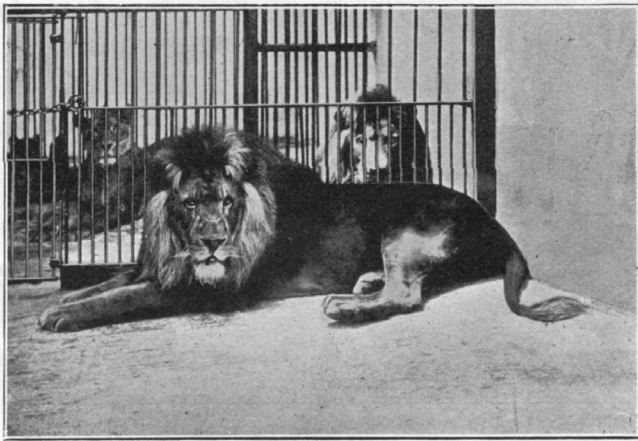
For the 1882 season, the grounds had been remodeled, with further imitation ruins extending the make-believe *Margate Abbey*, the walls of brick rubble and cement being designed to 'make the grounds more private than hitherto.'¹⁷ Outside the door-way of the menagerie was some rockwork, to be called "The Prophet's Cave" with dripping wells and petrifying waters.¹⁵ The view of the *Margate Abbey* is familiar from many early postcards of the grounds.

When the Hall-by-the-Sea was offered for sale at auction in 1899, it covered an area of over four acres: 'The grounds are in excellent condition, whilst the collection of rare animals, housed in the most comfortable of sanitary cages, houses, dens, &c., present attractions unsurpassed by any other property in England of this description.'¹⁸ Despite this, it failed to sell, and was withdrawn by the auctioneer at £45,000, not having

reached the reserve price of £55,000.¹⁹ In fact, the menagerie was not finally sold until 1905, a sale managed by Tom Norman, a well known auctioneer and showman, famous for managing the Elephant Man, various troupes of midgets, Mary Anne Bevan, the World's Ugliest Woman, and Mrs. Baker, who's act consisted of biting the heads off live rats.²⁰



The Zoological Gardens. The menagerie is to the left, with the Margate Abbey ruins to the right, with steps leading up to the top of the old railway embankment.



Lion cages in the menagerie. From *The Summer Season 1903-4. Margate and Westgate with Birchington*. W. T. Pike and Co., Brighton

Conditions in the menagerie would undoubtedly shock us today. The cages were small, lacked any stimulation for the animals, and, at least in the early days, provided poor protection for the public. In 1879, a little girl had gone with her aunt to see the animals being fed. She passed a piece of cake into a leopard in one of the cages, but then, when she put her arm between the bars of the cage with a second piece of cake, the leopard attacked her, and her arm was so badly hurt that it had to be amputated.²¹ In 1876, one of the keepers, on his rounds feeding the animals, was attacked by a leopard.²² In 1884, there was a fight between some of the animals after the gardens had closed: 'the tigress that occupied a den adjoining one containing three very fine young lions became restive, and tore down the partition dividing them. A terrible encounter then commenced. The older animal, by her immense strength and activity, dispatched the three lions before any assistance could be rendered.'²³

Some of the animals were in the menagerie because they were too old to perform in public: 'There is a lion evidently very ill, which, with its blinking eyes and pathetic face, looks just like a great faithful old dog.'²⁴ And the keepers were not always kind: 'The performance of the lion tamer I did not like at all. He goes into the cage in which are two lions, the fine black-manned lion and a younger one. He has a rattan cane, and with it flogs the two lions unmercifully, making them jump over a board and stand up against the bars. The lions snarl and show their teeth, but wince from the sting of the rain of blows. It is the proof of the superior brutality of man, and, in my opinion, is a cruel and useless performance.'²⁴ Nevertheless, the reporter adds that the menagerie was 'kept sweeter and cleaner than any other home of wild beasts that I know.'

The menagerie was also used to breed animals. Sanger reports that at Margate 'I had twelve full-grown wolves, all bred at the Hall-by-the-Sea from old animals that had passed away with age and infirmity, and all as tame as dogs. Still they were wolves, the genuine article, and could be trusted to act as such upon occasion.'²⁵ These he used for his shows in London.

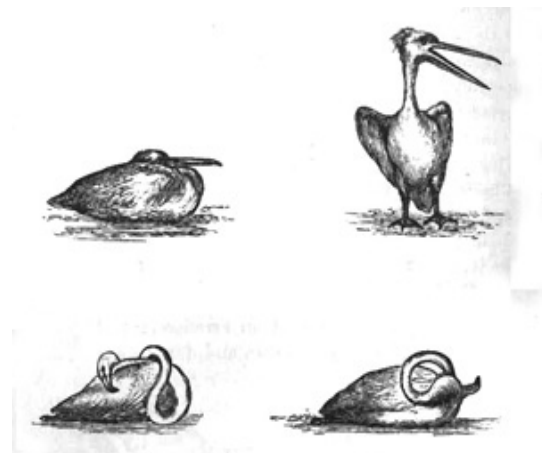
Having young animals in the menagerie provided, of course, a very useful crowd pleaser. In 1883:

The latest addition to Mr George Sanger's well-stocked and largely patronised menagerie at the Hall-by-the-Sea, Margate, is a litter of lion cubs, three in number, and they are being suckled by a large Austrian bitch, the young of which are being reared by another dog. The den in which the young lions and their foster mother are is, as may readily be imagined, the centre of much interest.²⁶

Behind the scenes access to the animals seems to have been much freer than it would be today. The thriller writer Dennis Wheatley recalls, as a boy, being allowed to handle the lion cubs and other young animals.²⁷ Similarly, Weedon Grossmith, the actor and co-author with his brother George of *Diary of a Nobody*, describes being photographed with a rather frighteningly large six-month old lion cub, George, sitting on his lap.²⁸ Wood's son suggests that his father obtained free access to the animals 'partly by his own natural talent for going wherever and doing whatever he wished, partly, I have reason to believe, by the still more potent aid of an appeal to the pocket.'² His friendship with the head-keeper meant that:

he was permitted to do exactly what he pleased without any sort of interference from anyone. And he soon came to be on terms of the most perfect friendship with the lions and tigers, which would allow him to pull them about, examine their claws, and, in fact, do just whatever he liked with them. And all this amiability was due to his habit of taking a small bottle of lavender water with him whenever he visited the menagerie, sprinkling a few drops upon a rolled-up ball of paper, and then throwing it into the cage. The animals used to go nearly wild in their exuberant delight. They would grasp the ball with both fore-paws, hold it close to their nostrils, and then draw in a succession of deep inhalations of the fascinating perfume, purring loudly the while. Then would come, perhaps, a loud roar, expressive of deep enjoyment, and then more inhalations; and so on. And after he had visited them a few times they used to detect my father in the far distance, and dance about in their cages with excitement, roaring loudly, until he came up and produced his paper balls.²

A sketch-book of Wood's contains a whole series of illustrations of pelicans and flamingoes in eccentric attitudes



Pelicans (top) and flamingoes (bottom) sketched by Wood at the Hall-by-the-Sea.

drawn from life at the Zoological Gardens.² Some of these were reproduced in the edition he edited of Charles Waterton's famous *Wanderings in South America*.²⁹ But of more interest is a long article published in 1886, *The Humours of a Menagerie*, describing his almost daily visits to the Hall-by-the-Sea.³⁰

Some of the animals in the menagerie were well known: 'There is the lioness which has made repeated balloon ascents. There is the seal which once belonged to the Polytechnic, and which always sat on the helmet of the diver as he disappeared beneath the water.' There was also a large African lion, Wallace, with a fearsome reputation, gained in Birmingham. Sanger's fair was visiting Bingley Hall, Birmingham, in 1881. The fair included waxworks, rides on steam bicycles, shooting galleries, a six-legged horse, and a large menagerie, with six performing elephants and seventeen performing lions, and baby tigers, lions, hyenas, and leopards, bears, kangaroos, monkeys and a large collection of exotic birds.³¹ One feature of the show was a performance involving several of the African lions.^{32,33} On 22 January, the lion tamer, Alicamoussa, had only been in the cage with the lions for a few minutes when he was attacked by Wallace, which a few days before had nearly killed one of the under-keepers, named Harris. 'The lion sprang upon the tamer, placed his two fore paws upon his shoulders, and dashed him upon the floor of the cage, seizing him by the right arm, which he bit and tore.' In one version of the tale, Alicamoussa, who had a revolver loaded with blank cartridges, then 'fired one shot, but this had no effect. He then struck the lion on the head with the butt end of the pistol, and at the same time one of the under-keepers, through the bars of the cage, hit the beast with a long iron. The lion loosed his hold, and the tamer regained his feet and fired another shot. Wallace sulkily retired, and Alicamoussa coolly walked out of the cage.'³² In another, less heroic version of the tale, immediately after the lion attacked, 'the red-hot irons were at once thrust between the bars, and the man [Alicamoussa] wriggled like an eel from beneath the lion, the blood streaming down his face and shoulder. He discharged his revolver, which was only loaded with blank cartridge, three times into the lion's mouth, and, gaining his feet, placed his back against the side of the cage and attacked the animal with his loaded whip, hitting it repeatedly between the eyes, until it was nearly stunned.'³³ It was reported that 'the lion Wallace, since he attacked the under-keeper Harris, has been very morose, and he will be at once sent to the Zoological Gardens at Margate, as it is not considered safe for any lion-tamer to enter his cage.'³²

Alicamoussa was an interesting character. His real name was Alexander or John Humphreys, and he was born on the island of St. Vincent, in 1859.³⁴ He left as a teenager and traveled to London, where he got work in Astley's Amphitheatre in Westminster Bridge Road, Sanger's London theatre, riding an elephant in the stage show. After several weeks, Sanger sent him to Margate to help with feeding and cleaning the animals. Then, at Margate:

I was cleaning out a den containing two lions and a lioness, when he [Sanger] asked me if I would dare to go into the cage. I answered that I would dare anything, and went in. When I wanted to come



Alicamoussa, the lion-tamer

out, one of the lions was lying by the door, and would not move; I, therefore, struck him with my stick, whereupon he gave a growl and looked as if it really meant to spring on me, I must confess that for the moment my nerve failed me; however, keeping my position and approaching with renewed courage one step towards him, he moved slyly away, and in an instant I was outside the cage; after seeing this, Mr. Sanger told me that if I could manage and make them perform, he would pay me well, and I should travel with him. I thought this a very advantageous offer, and decided to try my best to do what he desired. I went to work, therefore, and in a short time could make them jump over my legs, and was able even to handle one of them, open his mouth, &c. My courage was greatly admired, being noticed more on account of my youth, I being then but seventeen years old.

Alicamoussa later toured widely in Europe as an animal trainer and was most famous for an act that involved wrestling with a lion.³⁴

Wood was fascinated by the tigers in the menagerie. 'To an ordinary visitor, the animals in a menagerie are very much alike, so that if forty or fifty lions or tigers were placed in the same enclosure he could no more distinguish one from another than he could pick out an individual sheep from among a flock. Yet a shepherd could do so, and any keeper who knows his business can pick out his own lions or tigers from among any number of animals.' To illustrate the point, Wood describes two tigresses: 'One of these animals is quite an ally of mine, and will allow me to take almost any liberties with her, while the other is so surly that I have hardly dared to touch her. So, being desirous of preserving my hands and arms from being devoured by the wrong tigress, and knowing how frequently the attendants transfer the animals from one cage to another, I never trust my hand inside the cage until

I have identified its inmate. This is easy enough. I stand in front of the cage, call the tigress by name, talk to her for a little while, and then invite her to come up to me. If it be the right animal she walks up and down the cage several times, coming nearer the bars each time, until she presses her side against them. Then when I begin to stroke her fur she settles herself down, just as a cat would do, and quite enjoys being patted and stroked and talked to, mostly stretching herself and relieving her feelings with a mighty yawn and long-drawn grunt.⁷

Wood was particularly intrigued by a single large cage filling nearly the whole of one end of the building, housing ‘a number of animals, which would seem to be antagonistic to each other. But the keeper, Walter Stratford [who, incidentally, was the under-keeper who saved Alicamoussa in Birmingham³⁵], takes a pleasure in placing in the same cage exactly those animals which would appear to be most incongruous as comrades, and trying to make them agree with each other. Here is a list of the creatures which occupied this cage together on my first visit. Twelve monkeys of various species; two racoons, a coaitimondi [an animal like a racoon]; four cats; a jackal; a porcupine; a goat; two pigs, several geese and ducks; a small white Pomeranian dog and her two children, of which the jackal was the father; and a few rabbits and guinea-pigs. A more miscellaneous assemblage it is not easy to imagine, and yet these creatures find a strange happiness in each others’ company.’ The ruler of the cage was the dog Rose ‘which exercises her authority by sheer force of character, and reigns despotically over animals far larger and more powerful than herself.’ The monkey’s liked to ride on the back of the pigs and pull their tails, and ‘it is very amusing to watch a jackal trotting along with bushy tail erect, while it suddenly recollects that it is passing under a bar tenanted by a monkey. The way in which it droops its tail and scurries out of reach of the monkey’s paw seems to amuse its persecutor almost as much as a successful grasp at its victim. As to the jackals themselves, they slink away for a moment, but soon forget their previous experiences, and run the same risk again.’ Apparently, ‘a remarkable friendship exists between the porcupine and a little black Manx cat’ and ‘the restless coaiti traverses the whole cage, sometimes trotting over the floor, and sometimes clambering the bars and wires, and poking its long snout into the ribs of the racoons, as they hang in their favorite position on the roof of the cage, with their heads thrust through the bars. In this attitude they look exactly as if they had accidentally pushed their heads through the bars, and could not pull them back again. Many a time have compassionate visitors summoned a keeper for the purpose of releasing the apparently imprisoned animals.’

Feeding time was always popular with the public:

There are two wolves occupying one cage, and at feeding-time they always afford great amusement. The keeper gives them one large piece of meat, generally a portion of the side with several ribs in it. They tear it off the fork, and then seize it on opposite sides, their noses nearly touching each other. They growl and haul against each other, but neither dares to loosen his hold of the meat to bite lest the other should finish it. At last one of them tears off a portion, and begins to swallow it as ravenously as he can. His companion immediately runs to the farthest corner of the cage, and tries to eat

as much as he can before the other returns for more, keeping his head carefully in the corner, so that the meat may be out of reach. A struggle then ensues, until both have again taken hold of the meat, and then the whole business is repeated until the meat is finally consumed. I have noticed that, although this mode of feeding seems as if it might be unfair to one of the animals, each wolf gets his half of the food almost as accurately as if they had been fed separately.

A particular favorite of Wood’s was a polar bear, which would ‘take a piece of biscuit out of my hand as gently as if he were a dog. He is a playful beast, and dearly loves a practical joke. He lives in a large double cage, made in two stages, the dwelling stage being three or four feet above the lower stage, which contains his bath. A short, broad flight of steps leads from the upper stage to the bath, so as to enable the bear to enter or leave the water. But when the animal sees a number of visitors round the cage, he has a way of plumping into the bath without using the steps, thus splashing the nearest spectators from head to foot. I am certain that this is done with malice prepense, as I never saw him jump into the water except on such occasions.’

The Rev. J. G. Wood clearly enjoyed his visits to Margate and its menagerie.

Notes

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- 9 *The Era*, March 11, 1882
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- 12 *Thanet Guardian*, May 20 1876
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- 35 *Birmingham Daily Post*, Jan. 24, 1881