

**Jamrach's Animal Emporium,
Ratcliff Highway, London, England**

An article from *The Strand Magazine* 1891

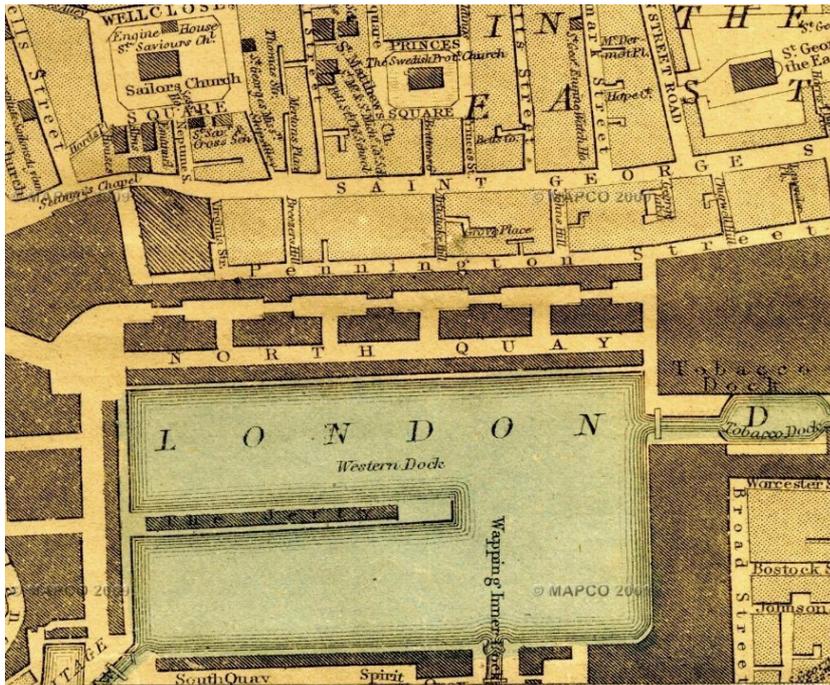
with foreword and footnotes by

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The following article was first published in *The Strand Magazine* and provides a useful insight into the business of wild beast supply during mid to late Victorian England¹. This was an enlightening time for the importation of wild beasts from all over the globe and Jamrach's was at the forefront of the business, especially during the second half of the century. Many zoos, travelling menageries and circuses had a constant demand for showing these animals across the whole country, the life span of many exotic animals in captivity being in some cases just a few months.

Charles Jamrach (1815 – 1891) was the leading dealer and his emporium was situated in what was then known as Ratcliff Highway in east London — at the time the largest such shop in the world. From the description the building can be placed on the 1868 *Edward Weller* map of London near to the Tobacco Dock somewhere along St George's Road (to the right of North Quay).



Jamrach was born in [Germany](#). His father, Johann Gottlieb Jamrach, was chief of the Hamburg river police, whose contacts with sailors enabled him to build up a trade as a dealer in birds and wild animals, establishing branches in Antwerp and London. George Wombwell is thought to have started in a similar fashion having made acquaintances with many sea captains coming into the London docks earlier in the century.

Charles Jamrach moved to London and took over that branch of the business after his father's death in circa 1840. He

became a leading importer with agents in other major British ports, including Liverpool, Southampton and Plymouth. As indicated in the article, his business included a shop and a museum named *Jamrach's Animal Emporium* and it is thought Jamrach also had a menagerie in Betts Street in the East End and a warehouse in Old Gravel Lane, Southwark, in South London.

¹ G Newnes (ed), Jamrach's, *The Strand Magazine*, (London 1891) Vol. 1, pp429-36

The following article is reproduced in the same format as the original (except the columns have been removed) with all the original spelling and grammar intact and the illustrations as they appeared in the magazine.

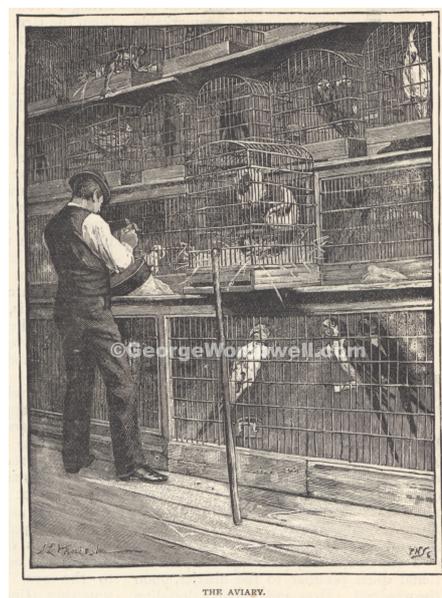
The Strand Article



The shop we are about to visit- perhaps quite the most remarkable in London-stands in a remarkable street, Ratcliff-highway. Ratcliff-highway is not what it was - indeed, its proper name is now St.George's-street, but it still retains much of its old eccentric character. The casual pedestrian who wanders from the neighbourhood of the Mint, past the end of Leman-street and the entrance to the London Dock, need no longer fear robbery with violence; nor may he with any confidence look to witness a skirmish of crimps and foreign sailors with long knives ; but, if his taste for observation incline to more tranquil harvest, his eye, quiet or restless, will fall upon many a reminder of the Highway's historic days, and of those relics of its ancient character which still linger. Sailors' boarding-houses are seen in great numbers, often with crossed flags, or a ship in full sail, painted, in a conventional spirit peculiar to the district, upon the windows. Here and there is a slop shop where many dangling oilskins and sou'westers wave in the breeze, and where, as often as not, an old figure-head or the effigy of a naval officer in the uniform of fifty years ago stands as a sign. There are

shops where advance notes are changed, and where the windows present a curious medley of foreign bank notes, clay pipes, china tobacco-jars, and sixpenny walking sticks, and there are many swarthy-faced men, with ringed ears, with print shirts and trousers unsupported by braces ; also there are many ladies with gigantic feathers in their bonnets, of painful hue, and other ladies who get along very comfortably without any bonnets at all.

In a street like this, every shop is, more or less, an extraordinary one; but no stranger would expect to find in one of them the largest and most Varied collection of arms, curiosities, and works of savage and civilised art brought together for trade purposes in the world, and this side by side with a stock of lions, tigers, panthers, elephants, alligators, monkeys, or parrots. Such a shop, however, will be the most interesting object of contemplation to the stray wayfarer through St. George's-street, and this is the shop famed throughout the world as Jamrach's. Everybody, of course, knows Jamrach's by name, and perhaps most know it to be situated somewhere in the waterside neighbourhood of the East-end; but few consider it anything more than an emporium from which the travelling menageries are supplied with stock. This, of course, it is, but it is something besides; and, altogether, one of the most curious and instructive spots which the seeker after the quaint and out-of-the-way may visit is Jamrach's.



The shop, which we find on the left-hand side as we approach it from the west, is a double one, and might easily be taken for two separate establishments. The first window we reach might be passed as that of an ordinary bird fancier's, were the attention not attracted by the unusually neat, clean,

and roomy appearance of the cages displayed, and the uncommon shapes and colours of the birds which inhabit them. The next window is more catching to the eye. Furious Japanese figures, squatting Hindoo gods, strange and beautiful marine shells, and curious pottery bring the pedestrian to a stand, and arouse a desire to explore within. All this outside, however, gives small promise of the strange things to be seen and learnt behind the scenes. Returning to the door by the aviary window, we enter, and find ourselves in a bright, clean room, eighteen or twenty feet square, properly warmed by a stove placed in the centre. The walls, from floor to ceiling, are fitted with strong and commodious wire cages, in which birds of wonderful voice and hue and monkeys of grotesque lineament yell, whistle, shriek, and chatter. Great and gorgeous parrots of rare species flutter and scream, and blinking owls screw their heads aside as we pass. But the cause in chief of all this commotion is the presence of an attendant in shirt-sleeves, who, carrying with him a basket, is distributing there from certain eatables much coveted hereabout. Beaked heads are thrust between bars, and many a long, brown arm reaches downward and forward from the monkey-cages, in perilous proximity to the eager beaks. In a special cage, standing out from the rest, a beautiful black and white lemur sits and stretches his neck to be fondled as the attendant passes, but shyly; hides his face when we strangers approach him².



Here Mr. Jamrach himself comes to meet us—a fine old gentleman, whose many years and remarkable experiences have left but small impression upon him. Coming from Hamburg—where his father before him was a trading naturalist—he founded the present business in Shadwell more than fifty years ago, and here he is still in his daily harness, with all the appearance of being quite fit for another half-century of work among snakes and tigers. His two sons—one of whom we shall presently meet—have assisted him in the business all their lives. The elder of these, who was a widely-known naturalist of great personal popularity, died some few years since. Mr. Jamrach takes us into a small, dusty back room, quaint in its shape and quaint in its contents. Arms of every kind which is not an ordinary kind stand in corners, hang on walls, and litter the floors; great two-handed swords of mediaeval date and of uncompromisingly English aspect stand amid heaps of Maori clubs, African spears, and Malay kreeses ; on the

floor lies, open, a deal box filled with rough sheets of tortoise-shell, and upon the walls hang several pictures and bas-reliefs³. Mr. Jamrach picks up by a string a dusty piece of metal, flat, three-quarters of an inch thick, and of an odd shape, rather resembling a cheese-cutter. This, we are informed is a bell, or, perhaps more accurately, a gong, and was used on the tower of a Burmese temple to summon the worshippers. Reaching for a short knobkerry, which bears more than one sign of having made things lively on an antipodean skull, Mr. Jamrach strikes the uninviting piece of metal upon the side in such a way as to cause it to spin, and we, for the first time, fully realise what sweet music may lie in a bell⁴. The sound is of the most startling volume— as loud as that of a good-sized church bell, in fact— and dies away very slowly and gradually in a prolonged note of indescribable sweetness. The metal is a peculiar amalgam, silver being the chief ingredient; and oh that all English church bells—and, for that matter, dinner bells—had the beautiful voice of this quaint bit of metal.

² Thought to be white-headed lemur (*Eulemur albifrons*) and is to be found only in Madagascar.

³ Malay Kreeses are a form of large undulating bladed weapon.

⁴ Knobkerry (or Knobkierrie) is a large club from mainly Southern and Eastern Africa.

Then Mr. Jamrach shows us wonderful and gorgeous marine shells, of extreme value and rarity, and some of a species which he originally introduced to men of science, in consequence of which it now bears an appalling Latin name ending with *jamrachus*⁵.

Passing from the back of this little room, we enter a very large one, extending from the front to the back of the entire premises, with a gallery on three sides above. Here we are joined by the younger Mr. Jamrach, and here we stand amid the most bewildering multitude of bric-a-brac and quaint valuables ever jumbled together: fantastic gods and goddesses, strange arms and armour, wonderful carvings in ivory, and priceless gems of old Japanese pottery. Merely to enumerate in the baldest way a tenth part of these things would fill this paper, and briefly to describe a hundredth part would fill the magazine. And when we express our wonder at the extent of the collection, we are calmly informed that this is only a part—there are more about the building—four or five roomfuls or so!

We have come to St. George's-street expecting to see nothing but a zoological warehouse, and all this is a surprise. That such a store as we now see were hidden away in Shadwell would have seemed highly improbable, and indeed we are told that very few people are aware of its existence.

“The museums know us, however,” says Mr. Jamrach the younger, “and many of their chief treasures have come from this place.”

Among the few curious visitors who have found their way to Jamrach's there has been the Prince of Wales, who stayed long, and left much surprised and pleased at all he had seen. The late Frank Buckland, too, whose whole-souled passion for natural history took him to this establishment day after day, often for all day, could rarely resist the fascination of the museum, even while his beloved animals growled in the adjacent lairs⁶. The Jamrachs do not push the sale of this bric-a-brac, and seem to love to keep the strange things about them. Their trade is in animals, and their dealings in arms and curiosities form almost a hobby. Many of the beautiful pieces of pottery have stood here thirty years, and their proud possessors seem in no great anxiety to part with them now. A natural love of the quaint and beautiful first led Mr. Jamrach to buy carvings and shells from the seafaring men who brought him his birds and monkeys, so that these men soon were led to regard his warehouse as the regulation place of disposal for any new or old thing from across the seas ; and so sprang up this overflowing museum.

Among hundreds of idols we are shown three which are especially noteworthy. The first is a splendid life-sized Buddha—a work of surprising grace and art. The god is represented as sitting, his back being screened by a great shell of the purest design. The whole thing is heavily gilt, and is set, in places, with jewels. Every line is a line of grace, and the features, while of a distinct Hindoo cast, beam with a most refined mildness. What monetary value Mr. Jamrach sets on this we do not dare to ask; and, indeed, we are now placed before the second of the three—a Vishnu carved in alto-relievo of some hard black wood. This is a piece of early Indian art, and it has a history. It was fished up some twenty years ago from the bottom of the river Krishna, where it had been reverently deposited by its priests to save it from insult and mutilation at the hands of the invading Mohammedan; and there it had lain for eight hundred years. It is undamaged, with the exception that the two more prominent of the four arms are broken off ; and that it has escaped the insult which its devout priests feared is testified by the fact that the nose—straight, delicate, and almost European in shape—has not been broken.

5 I think this must have been Jamrach's own invention, since I cannot trace any botanical references to *jamrachus*.

6 Francis Trevelyan Buckland (1826 – 1880), known as Frank Buckland, was an English surgeon, zoologist, popular author and natural historian.

It is an extremely rare thing for a Vishnu free from this desecration—a fatal one in the eyes of worshippers—to be seen in this country. Above the head are carved medallions representing the ten incarnations of the god, for the last of which mighty avatars millions still devoutly wait in mystic India; while here, in Ratcliff-highway, after all its dark adventures, and after its eight centuries of immersion below the Krishna, stands the embodiment of the god himself, mildly serene and meekly dignified.



The third of these gods is quite a different person. There is nothing resembling beauty—either of conception or workmanship—about him. He is very flat-chested, and his form is faithfully represented in the accompanying illustration ; without an illustration he would be indescribable. The head is very small, and grotesquely carved, with a large boar's tusk projecting from the jaw. The trunk and limbs, however, are the parts of interest; they consist of an entire human skin stretched on a sort of flat wooden framework, and partly stuffed with dried grasses. The skin is a light brown, leathery looking stuff, with here and there a small crack. The legs are clothed with loose blue trousers, which appear to be of dungaree, or a similar material, and the complete deity came from the Friendly Islands some time since⁷. Just at his feet lie, in an open packing box, certain mummified heads, some bearing unmistakable marks of hard knocks, all having been, no doubt, ' among the most cherished possessions of the gentleman who had separated them from the shoulders upon which they originally grew. Of heads and skulls we see many, and among them the skull of an undoubted cannibal — a thing of very peculiar conformation. And so we go on from room to room, where the sunlight peeps in with difficulty, and paints with light and shadow the memorials of

savage art, warfare and worship, as well as many exquisite specimens of porcelain and metal work from Japan and Florence. We see the garment of

cowtails which Ketchwayo wore when taken prisoner, and we see a testimony to the guile of the wily Maori in an axe made of iron only, but painted and got up to exactly resemble greenstone⁸. The reason of the disguise becomes apparent when it is explained that for the genuine greenstone article of this pattern a collector will gladly pay a hundred pounds, while the metal imitation is worth its weight as old iron, and no more. We see two pairs of magnificent china vases five or six feet high, the like of which it would be difficult to find offered for sale anywhere. Another pair, which had stood here for thirty years, were bought only a week or two back by a visitor of title with a cheque of three figures—a bargain which the buyer jumped at.

We are shown old Satsuma ware of wondrous delicacy and richness, commanding something more than its weight in sovereigns in the market⁹. We see grand old *repoussé* work in very high relief¹⁰. We linger over a singular old Japanese medicine cabinet, the outside of which is covered with hundreds of little silver charms, against as many varieties of disease—each charm a quaintly-wrought oval or scarabaeus. We examine two immense Japanese vases of copper, each six feet high, and of the most elaborate workmanship, the design revealing here and there, in a surprising manner, elementary forms and principles usually supposed to be wholly and originally Greek. There are

7 Tonga became known as the Friendly Islands because of the congenial reception accorded to Captain James Cook on his first visit there in 1773.

8 Ketchwayo (Cetshwayo kaMpande) was king of the Zulu kingdom 1872-79.

9 Satsuma porcelain has been produced in Japan since the 16th century.

10 *repoussé* is a metalworking technique performed on the reverse of a metal item, such as a bracelet, to form a raised design on its front.

stone weapons, bronze weapons, steel weapons, and wooden weapons of every outlandish sort, and musical instruments such as one sees represented on Egyptian sculptures. There are many things bought at the sale of the effects of the late king of Oude, an enthusiastic old gentleman whose allowance from the British Government was a lac of rupees a month, and who managed to spend it all, and more than all, on curiosities and works of art, so that his funeral was followed by a sale on behalf of his creditors¹¹. Among the old king's treasures in this place are seven small figures, of a dancing bear, a buck antelope, a gladiator, a satyr riding a furious bull, another riding a camel, an armed man on a rhinoceros, and a monkey mounted on a goat, respectively. Each of these little figures is built up of innumerable smaller figures of beasts, birds, and fishes, fighting and preying upon each other, not one speck of the whole surface belonging to the main representation, while, nevertheless, the whole produces the figure complete with its every joint, muscle, sinew, and feature. And so we pass, by innumerable sacred masks, pashas' tails and alligators' skulls, toward the other and main department of this remarkable warehouse—that devoted to natural history.

We cross Britten's-court, where we observe a van with a small crowd of boys collected about it. A crane is swung out from a high floor, and from the end of the dependent chain hangs a wooden case or cage, violently agitated by the movements of the active inhabitant. He is a black panther, the most savage sort of beast with which Mr. Jamrach has to deal, and, as this one feels himself gradually rising through the air, his surprise and alarm manifest themselves in an outburst strongly reminding the spectator of Mark Twain's blown-up cat "a-snorting, and a-clawing, and a-reaching for things like all possessed." He arrives at his appointed floor at last, however, and, as the cage is swung in, the blazing eyes and gleaming teeth turn from our side toward-the attendant who receives him.

The wide doors on the ground floor are swung open, and we enter a large apartment fitted with strong iron-barred cages on all sides. This is the lowest of three floors, similarly fitted, in which is carried on a trade in living creatures which is known from one end of the earth to the other. Jamrach's is the market for wild animals from all the world over, and whatever a menagerie-keeper or a zoological collection may want, from an elephant to an Angora cat, can be had in response to an order sent here. Whatever animal a man may have to sell, here he may sell it, providing that it be in good and healthy condition. Mr. Jamrach has lived a lifetime among his beasts, and has had his troubles and adventures with them. One of the most exciting of these adventures took place some thirty years ago. A fine, full-grown Bengal tiger was deposited, in his rough wooden cage, on this very spot at the gates, having just been delivered from a ship in the docks. The lair at the back was being prepared for his reception, when, the attention of Mr. Jamrach and his merry men being otherwise engaged, *Tigris regalis* set his hindquarters against the back of his temporary receptacle, and, using all his strength, managed to burst out the boards¹². Then he quietly trotted out, and down the main street. The sudden appearance of a full-sized tiger at mid-day on the pavement of Ratcliff-



11 A region of colonial India forming the modern day Uttar Pradesh.

12 A subspecies as described by the zoologist Edward Gray in 1867

Highway was the signal for a general skedaddle, excepting on the part of a little boy of about eight years of age, who, never having seen a thing of the sort before, innocently extended his hand and stroked the big cat. A playful tap of the great soft paw at once knocked the child upon his face, stunned ; and, picking him up by the loose part of the jacket, the animal was proceeding up the next turning, when Mr. Jamrach, who had just discovered the escape, came running up. Empty-handed as he was, he sprang at the tiger's neck from behind, and, grasping the throat with both hands, drove his thumbs into the soft place behind the jaw. Mr. Jamrach was an unusually powerful man—indeed, he is no weakling now, though nearer eighty than seventy years of age—and at his scientific grasp the tiger, half choked, let his captive fall, when a couple of heavy blows across the eyes from a crowbar thrust into the naturalist's hands by an attendant thoroughly cowed the great beast, who turned tail and meekly trotted back straight into the lair prepared for him, the door of which stood open for his reception. The little boy was without a scratch; but, although £50 was offered his father as compensation, Mr. Jamrach's intrepidity was rewarded by an action for £500 damages. In the end the smaller amount first offered was awarded, and the loss in costs was made sweeter by the judge's praise of the defendant's prompt and courageous action. The monetary loss had already been discounted by the arrival, in hot haste, the day after the accident, of a showman, who gladly paid £300 for the culprit. This was no bad speculation on his part, it was found, when he had counted up the sixpences received all over the country for admission to see the "tiger that had eaten a boy alive in Ratcliff-highway."

And so, with many an anecdote of his own and his father's experiences in their peculiar business from Mr. Jamrach the younger, we go upstairs and wander among the stock. This, of course, is ever varying in quantity and species, but has always some interesting feature. We are introduced to a solemn monkey, who salaams gravely three times, and then waits to be asked to shake hands, which he does with great ceremony. We see porcupines, black swans and antelopes, and we hear, at the



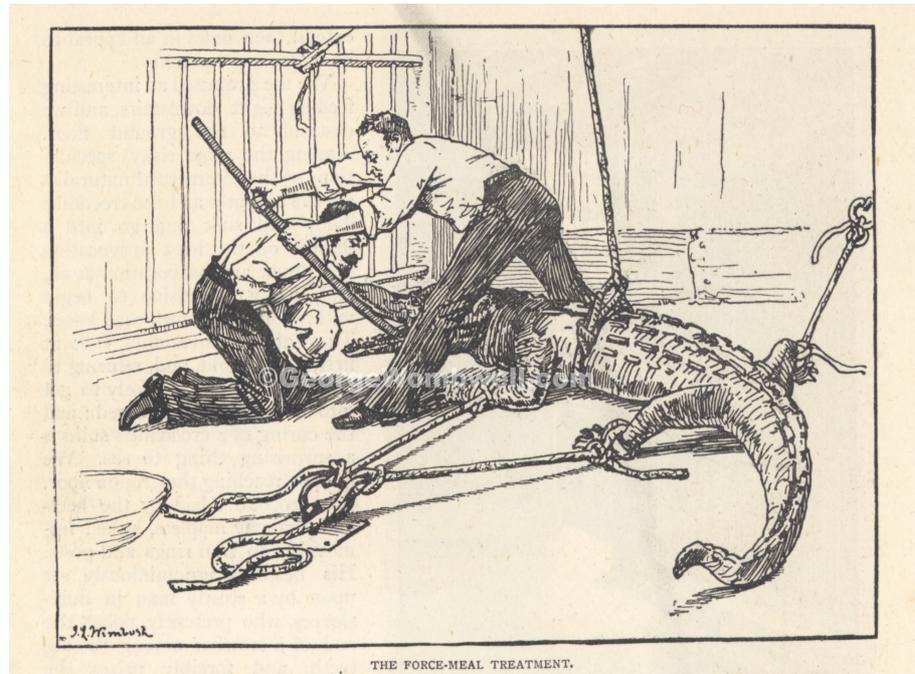
peril of never hearing anything afterwards, the noisy cranes. There is a Sumatra civet cat, with a small, fox-like head, and a magnificent tail; he is not cordial, and snaps an awkward-looking row of sharp teeth at us. Just behind his little cage is a large one, which contains a fine, tall guanaco or wild llama. The docile-looking creature moves to and fro behind the bars, keeping his eye on us, and pursing his mouth the while. Suddenly Mr. Jamrach says, "Look out, he's going to spit!" and we all duck in different directions with great celerity—only just in time. The intelligent quadruped has conceived a prejudice against the shape of somebody's hat, or the colour of somebody's tie, and expresses it by spitting, with much force and precision, at the offender's face. A large increase in the general chatter and growl around us announces the approach of an attendant with food. The emus and cassowaries stretch their long necks as far between the bars as possible, and the pelicans and cranes yell agonisingly. A large black panther throws himself against the bars of his cage, and gives voice unrestrainedly. In contrast to these, the domestic cat of the

establishment follows the man's heels, with much tender purring and a sharp eye to any stray fallen morsel.

There are other cats here in cages—cats too valuable to be allowed to run loose—magnificent Angoras and Carthusians, who rub their heads against the wires, and, as we approach, extend their paws in an appeal to be noticed and petted. We are promised an interesting feeding sight downstairs, and we descend to the ground floor. ‘ Among the more risky speculations of the commercial naturalist are the alligator and the crocodile. They will sulk and go into a decline on the least provocation or without any provocation at all, and, being expensive to begin with, often prove awkward losses.

They almost invariably sulk at first, we are told, and, refusing to take food, would be likely to get into a bad way unless cured

; and the curing of a crocodile’s sulks is a surprising thing to see. We find, on reaching the ground floor, poor crocodilus laid by the heels and perfectly helpless, lashed immovably to iron rings and posts. His head is ignominiously sat upon by a sturdy man in shirt-sleeves, who presently pokes the end of a crowbar among the big teeth, and forcibly prizes the mouth open into that position of comprehensive smile so familiar to the readers of children’s natural history



books. Then another man kneels before the unfortunate reptile and feeds him. That is to say, he takes a lump of meat weighing five or ten pounds or so, and dexterously pitches it into the oesophagus, afterwards firmly and decisively ramming it home with a long pole. This is the dinner of all naughty, sulky crocodiles, and, after having it served in this fashion regularly four or five times, the victim gives up sulking as a bad job. He will have to swallow it, one way or another, he argues within himself, and in that case he may as well take it without being tied up, and sat upon, and insulted generally; besides which, he may as well enjoy the flavour as swallow all those eatables without tasting them. Whereupon he reforms and becomes a respectable crocodile, taking regular meals, and is in time promoted to the Zoological Gardens, or a respectable menagerie.

This and other things we see, and we have it explained how dangerous animals are transferred from cases to permanent cages, and back again. To transfer a savage panther or tiger from a case to a cage is not difficult. Certain of the bars the cage are raised, the case is put opposite the opening, and the side removed. Seeing an opening the captive jumps at it, and the bars are at once shut down. But to tempt him back again into a case, when he has become to some extent accustomed to his quarters, is not always so easy a thing. Carefully baiting the case with food usually has its effect, if circumstances permit. Waiting ; but, if not, recourse has to be had to smoke. A little damp straw thrust between the bars and lighted soon makes the lair uncomfortable, and then ensues a scene. Eyes gleam, and teeth gnash from obscure corners, and presently, with a bound and a yell, the powerful beast dashes through the opening into the case, and is secured. It may be easily understood that any little clumsiness or mistake at the critical moment might lead to

the case being overturned in the rush, or improperly closed. Then, with a tiger or black panther worked to the highest pitch of frenzy by the fire and smoke, some lively adventures would probably take place. And so we reach the door into Britten's- court, and, with cordial thanks to our entertainers for a most pleasant and instructive afternoon, emerge into Ratcliff-highway, with its dock labourers, its sailors' boarding-houses, and its slop-shops.

