

THE SECRET OF THE REPTILE HOUSE.

*A Sensitive Snake in a Garden grew
And the Keepers fed it (when no one knew)
With ducks, and rabbits, and guinea-pigs bright,
Or a live young kid in the dead of night.*

*But a rumour arose on that Garden fair
That a watchful eye was everywhere;
So they made a slim reptilian plan
To baffle the Humanitarian.*

(From a Shelleyan fragment.)

“CHRISTIANOS ad leones” was the cry of the heathen persecutors in ages long past, when the Christian martyrs were flung to the lions in the Roman amphitheatre. Time has now had his revenges; but I do not know that the new version of “Christianos ad leones,” as daily exemplified in the stream of visitors to the lion-houses at the Zoo, is altogether edifying. Indeed, it has sometimes occurred to me, when musing on that strange medley of thoughtless sight-seers, who derive an unaccountable pleasure from staring at the wretched life-prisoners in our great animal convict-station, that the irrational is not always confined to the inner side of the bars, and that there was some force in Thoreau’s epigram that God made man “a little lower than the animals.”

It all depends on how we look at these things. At present, menageries are simply part of the whole system which regards “the animals” as mere goods and chattels—“stuff” is the keepers’ technical term for them—created for the use and amusement of mankind, without any definite claim, in return, to a free and healthy

existence. The Zoological Gardens are doubtless better than some other menageries; but our whole method of treating animals is stupid and barbarous. We want a more humane and intelligent appreciation of animal life, and that sense of kinship which would make us desirous of seeing our rudimentary brethren under happier and more natural conditions. Cellular confinement is an inhuman system for humans and non-humans alike. It is a curious fact, noticed by Mr. Thompson-Seton and other writers, that the inmates even of "travelling menageries" enjoy better health than those confined in stationary exhibitions like the "Zoo." This is attributed to the change of air and scene, which at least gives the prisoners something new to see and to think about. Dr. W. B. Carpenter long ago remarked that the skeletons of the aged carnivora are often good for nothing, even as museum specimens, "their bones being rickety and distorted." The case of the eagles and large falcons is still more pitiable, nor is the remedy easy to find, until we are sufficiently humane and sensible not to desire to imprison these citizens of the free realms of air. Did any human being ever derive any benefit from seeing an eagle in a cage?*

And, after all, we ourselves pay the penalty for our lack of humanity, by the loss of humour that accompanies it: for the bathos of the notices that meet us at every turn in the Gardens is very depressing to those who are alive enough to feel it. The Bengal

* I have sometimes been reminded, when seeing some pompous visitor pass by the eagles' cages, of Christopher Smart's poem, "An Eagle Confined in a College Court":

"What time by thee Scholastic Pride
Takes his precise, pedantic stride,
Nor on thy misery casts a care;
The stream of love ne'er from his heart
Flows out to act fair pity's part,
But stinks and stagnates there."

Tigers' den labelled, "Beware of Pickpockets"! The Eagles' Aviaries labelled, "To the Refreshment Rooms"! Were ever such incongruous ideas set in such ludicrous proximity? There, disconsolate in durance vile, sits the fabled Bird of Jove, who bore off Ganymede to be the god's cup-bearer, while, within a few yards, the modern Ganymede is serving out coffees and lemon-squashes, and enjoying (though perhaps he knows it not) the most complete vengeance on the great Raptor who enslaved him.

When we are told, then, that a visit to the Zoological Gardens is "an education," the question arises—an education in what? A few generations ago it was the fashion to cage pauper lunatics where passers by could see them, and nurses would pleasantly take the children in their charge to have a peep at the maniacs! It may be that a future generation will equally marvel that the sight of caged animals could give any pleasure to our children, and our grown-up children, to whom the "Zoo" is now a paradise.

It is to be feared that the Humanitarian League is not regarded with favour by the officials of the Zoological Society, for it is mainly owing to the League's activities that much public criticism has been directed to the Gardens during the past ten or twelve years. As long ago as 1895 we published a leaflet, "The Zoophilist at the Zoo," in which attention was drawn to the urgent need of reform; and later, in 1901, we had the satisfaction of issuing as a Humanitarian League publication the very remarkable series of articles entitled "The Old Zoo and the New," contributed to the *Saturday Review* by Mr. Edmund Selous. Since the appearance of that pamphlet, there has been a rapid growth of public opinion as to the cruelty of the present system of confining wild animals in small dens and cages, and considerable, though still quite inadequate, reforms have been carried into effect. What is

really wanted, as Mr. Selous has pointed out—if we must have these menageries at all—is a new and improved “Zoo,” in another locality, on a less heavy soil and under less crass management than that of Regent’s Park ; but it is to be feared that the pecuniary cost must render this impossible, and that the only practicable course is to do the best we can with the existing establishment. And this brings us to our immediate subject. Apart from the general objection to “Zoos,” in London and elsewhere, there is one form of cruelty of so deliberate and horrible a character as to demand a special protest from humanitarians.†

THE SKELETON IN THE CUPBOARD.

For many years protests have been made from time to time against the cruel custom prevalent at the Zoological Gardens, of feeding the caged serpents on living animals, such as guinea pigs, rabbits, fowls, pigeons, and ducks. As long ago as 1870 there appeared a letter in the *Animal World* urging very sensibly that “no new knowledge is taught by the exhibition of the wretched victims waiting to be devoured,” and that if the serpents cannot live on food already dead, “a stuffed snake is as good an illustration of its kind as our humanity ought to allow.”

The record of the Society in this matter has throughout been a bad one; for it was only owing to the vigorous protest made by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in 1881 that the public were excluded from so demoralising a sight, and the Zoological Society has not the least right to claim credit, as it now seems to do,‡ for a change

† The Zoological Society’s Reptile House is especially dealt with in this pamphlet as being the most prominent institution of its kind in this country; but, of course, much of what is said applies equally to menageries in provincial towns.

‡ “We do not cater to the morbid taste,” wrote Mr. W. E. de Winton, Superintendent of the Gardens, March 4th, 1903.

which it adopted with great unwillingness at the time. Then, after making money out of the disgusting practice as long as it dared to do so, it went to the other extreme of excluding the public not only from the spectacle (which, of course, was proper), but from all knowledge of the facts, and for years took refuge in the plea which is now known to be fallacious, that live food is a “necessity” for snakes.

The successive secretaries of the Zoological Society have never attempted to take a straight course in this matter. They have known they had a skeleton in their cupboard, and their one object has been to conceal it. For example, in a letter dated January 22nd, 1903, Mr. W. L. Sclater gave an assurance that “the use of living animals as food for the inmates of the society’s reptile house is confined to cases in which such diet is a necessity”—that old stereotyped formula which has done duty for years. Did Mr. Sclater know that at least the larger serpents can be fed on dead food? Did the present secretary, Dr. Chambers Mitchell, know it—until the Humanitarian League brought the facts unmistakably to his mind? I cannot say; but it is certain that in the summer of 1903 Dr. Mitchell announced* that the Zoological Society was then carrying out the “suggestion” (apparently a novelty to him) of feeding the reptiles on newly killed prey, and that it promised, except in very rare cases and at long intervals, to be successful. Yet four years later (May 10, 1907) we find Dr. Mitchell, when questioned, informing the Home Secretary that “living prey is never given to serpents that will take dead prey.” Observe that long *after* the supposed adoption of the less barbarous system the only assurance which the

* In the *Morning Leader*, July 3rd, 1903, in the report of an interview. In a letter of Dr. Mitchell’s, addressed to a Fellow of the Zoological Society (May 15th, 1903), it was stated that the reform was already being carried out.

secretary can give is the same old, vague, general, and evasive formula which was given by his predecessor, almost in the same words, *before* the alleged reform was carried out! What atom of confidence can any sane person feel in such assurances as these, uttered as they are with parrot-like repetition by one official after another, and with no other purpose than to lull the public into repose? The Zoological Society of London stands convicted of one of two things—of gross ignorance as to the feeding of snakes in captivity, or of equally gross callousness as to the sufferings of the more highly organised animals on whom these disgusting reptiles were fed.

DESCRIPTIONS BY EYE-WITNESSES.

But before we go further, let me quote some descriptions of the snake-feeding published by eye-witnesses before the time when the public was excluded from the spectacle. The first is taken from a matter-of-fact article on "The Commissariat of the Zoological Gardens," contributed by Mr. J. Lord, himself a Fellow of the Zoological Society, to the *Leisure Hour* in 1865:

"It is not by any means a pleasant sight to witness the snakes at their meal, although it is, we believe, requisite to supply them with living victims. The big bull-frog demolishes his sparrow without even an attempt to kill it: stretching open the portals leading to its huge swallow, the panting little bird is crammed into it with his great flabby feet, like the hands of a demon. The yellow snakes pick up the cowering sparrows from the ground, as they hang by their tails from the dead branches: twisting their lissom bodies round the bird, like a living corkscrew, they crack its every bone to atoms. In like manner the boas and pythons destroy the rabbits they so relish. The mice and guinea-pigs are given to the venomous serpents, and rapidly die when punctured by the poisoned fang. . . . Sparrows cost 10d. per dozen, and are supplied by professed bird-catchers, who contract for the regular monthly ration of twenty dozen. The snakes get the larger share. The boas generally demolish a goodly lot of pigeons and rabbits."

The second description is a far more vivid one, and was written by no less keen an observer than Charles Dickens. We quote from Forster's "Life of Dickens," vol. iii., p. 146:

"I have been (by mere accident) seeing the serpents feed to-day, with the live birds, rabbits, and guinea-pigs—a sight so very horrible that I cannot get rid of the impression, and am at this present moment imagining serpents coming up the legs of the table, with their infernal flat heads and their tongues like the Devil's tail elongated for dinner. I saw one small serpent, whose father was asleep, go up to a guinea-pig (white and yellow, and with a gentle eye—every hair upon him erect with horror); corkscrew himself on the tip of his tail; open a mouth which couldn't have swallowed the guinea-pig's nose; dilate a throat which wouldn't have made him a stocking; and show him what his father meant to do with him when he came out of that evil-looking Hookah into which he had resolved himself. The guinea-pig backed against the side of the cage—said, 'I *know* it! I *know* it!'—and his eye glared and his coat turned wiry as he made the remark. Five small sparrows, crouching together in a little trench at the back of the cage, peeped over the brim of it all the time; and when they saw the guinea-pig give it up, and the young serpent go away looking at him over two yards and a quarter of a shoulder, struggled which should get into the innermost angle and be seized last. Every one of them then hid his eyes in another's breast, and then they all shook together like dry leaves—as I dare say they may be doing now, for old Hookah looked as dull as laudanum. Please to imagine two small serpents, one beginning on the tail of a white mouse, and one at the head, and each pulling his own way, and the mouse very much alive all the time, with the middle of him madly writhing" (1856).†

† In view of Charles Dickens's testimony, and that of many other eye-witnesses, it is amusing to find the Secretary of the Zoological Society asserting (*London Magazine*, April, 1908) that the spectacle of snake-feeding is unsuitable for the general public, "not because it is cruel, but because ignorant spectators think that it is cruel." Dickens was evidently one of the ignorant spectators. So, too, was Hood, whose account of a similar scene ending with the words, "It was a sorry sight and sickening," may be read in *Hood's Comic Annual*, 1831.

Readers who desire to realise even more fully the horrible nature of the process of snake-feeding, when living victims are sacrificed, are referred to a series of articles on "Serpents and Serpent-feeding" which appeared in the *Animal World* (the organ of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) in April, May, June, and July, 1881, where extracts were printed from about fifty letters written by different eye-witnesses. It will be remembered that at this time the feeding of the serpents was a public exhibition, so that no denial of what happens on such occasions was then possible; though then, as now, it was of course stoutly denied by the officials of the Zoological Society that there was any "cruelty" in the practice. Here is a spectator's description of what the Society did not consider to be cruel:

"The scenes with the larger reptiles were simply disgusting, and the cruelty revolting. In one case are confined two rat-snakes and two common pythons. In this case were put several frogs, two small rabbits, and two turtle-pigeons. The rat-snakes seized the frogs and afterwards the rabbits, and quickly despatched them. One of the pythons, after some chase, caught one of the birds, and coiling around, slowly suffocated it, leaving the remaining python unfed and a pigeon for it to consume. The bird's wings and tail were closely trimmed, and in consequence, combined with the most absolute terror, it could not cleverly evade its enemy. The python dashed at the pigeon, the pigeon tried to escape, and the reptile took out of the bird a full mouthful of feathers. The next essay resulted in the unfortunate creature losing part of its pinion, and it bled freely; the next trial, a wound in the side; the next and next, loss of more feathers and more wounds. The sickening sight lasted two hours; and when we left, at 7 p.m., the pigeon was still undergoing this exquisite torture, without any signs of abatement.

"In the next case, young rabbits were seized by the small boa-constrictors, and the usual crushing ensued, and the sight was afforded of seeing the struggling, quivering, palpitating creatures slowly squeezed in their less vital parts and dying an agonising death. Their cries were at times

piercing, and seemed to send a thrill of horror through the whole assembly.

"In another case are three large pythons, one of which was hibernating and could not be roused. The other two were hungry and lively—so much so that when two full-grown ducks were put to them they both made a dash at one duck. The effect was that the most successful imperfectly caught its prey, and the duck suffered most acutely in consequence, as, while watching its rival with jealousy, the captor seemed to disregard the speedy despatch of its victim. It had encircled it sufficiently to detain it painfully, but not effectually to cause death, and the writhings and struggles of the poor bird were absolutely dreadful. It seemed to be the very perfection of a slow and horribly cruel death. I carefully timed the time of dying, which was forty minutes, and the bird was certainly conscious all this time."

Nor must it be supposed that this was a singular experience, for letter after letter tells almost exactly the same story of hideous terror and prolonged agony. We read of one guinea-pig whose cries were "simply sickening," causing men, women, and children to rush to the spot; of another held in the coils of a serpent until the blood flowed from its mouth and its bowels were extruded; of a duck which, escaping for a time from a python, presented "a fearful spectacle of terror" as it "ran to and fro against the glass, mutely appealing for help"; of a rabbit seized by a snake not large enough to devour it, which necessitated its temporary liberation by a keeper after "a most horrible struggle"; and of many similar sights almost too revolting for words. "Fifty minutes" is again and again mentioned as the time during which these horrors endured. It is stated by Mr. John Colam, the then secretary of the R.S.P.C.A., and writer of these articles, that "twice we have ourselves seen an almost swallowed animal vainly struggling to escape from the throat of its tormentor; and four times have seen a python torture ducks for more than forty minutes, squeezing two of them by its cold-blooded, deliberate,

and slow process until extrusion of the intestines occurred."

In view of these facts, it is perfectly useless for the Zoological Society to pretend that snake-feeding is not a cruel process, for, thanks to its own cupidity in the past, we know from these unpublished accounts what happens on such occasions, and what prolonged and hideous tortures are inflicted on their terrified and sentient victims by these sluggish monsters. We challenge the Zoological Society to deny the authenticity of these published accounts, or to prove that the feeding of serpents on live animals is a less barbarous process now than it was in 1881.

Of the scene enacted when a live goat was given to the python no full description has been published, and the Zoological Society was not likely to give facilities for the writing of one; but a correspondent of the *Free Lance* (September 15th, 1902) was able to give some suggestive particulars which he had obtained from an unwary keeper. Here is an extract from the dialogue:

"How will the python kill this fellow?"

"He'll get a coil round and squeeze him."

"Is it a quick death? Do visitors see these reptiles feed?"

"Not much. They wouldn't want to see 'em feed twice. The python hasn't much room to move about, so, perhaps, he only gets one coil round, and that grip forces out the entrails and breaks the goat's ribs. Keepers have feelings like other people, and if they see that the goat is being kept in torture, a man will give the python a touch-up with an iron bar. This irritates him, and he takes another turn."‡

Is it necessary to quote more? Has not enough been

‡ In an article entitled "In the Reptile House" (*Daily News*, November 10th, 1902), it is stated that the python's appetite is very variable. "He has gone a whole year without food, while in another year he has eaten ten goats, even one a week for a short time."

said to show that the Earl of Kilmorey was fully justified in the protest made by him at the annual meeting of the R.S.P.C.A. in 1903: "I think it is an utterly unjustifiable piece of cruelty that a creature like the boa-constrictor should be fed with a live sensitive goat." Can there really be any doubt on the point in the mind, we will not say of an avowed humanitarian, but of any decent and civilised person? For we must remember that, though the public has been excluded from the spectacle since 1881, the practice itself was, perhaps *is*, still carried on; and we cannot suppose that the sufferings of the victims have been any less acute, because they were only witnessed by the official eye. Former publicity has now been succeeded by a secrecy which tried to keep the public wholly in the dark as to the facts; and in such matters "out of sight" is too often "out of mind."

REPTILIAN EXCUSES.

Yet desperate attempts have been made—mostly, it is true, by interested parties—to justify this horrible practice. "Accidents will happen to men and other animals," wrote Mr. A. D. Bartlett, late superintendent of the Gardens, in his "Wild Beasts at the Zoo." "*We* take our chance in the struggle for life. The serpent kills its prey, as a rule, quickly; and should it by accident fail to accomplish this act perfectly, who [*sic*] shall we dare to blame?" The same writer stated, what we now know to be contrary to fact, "that serpents, as a rule, would die of starvation if deprived of live prey."

Again, Mr. W. E. de Winton, another superintendent, has written that "animals have absolutely no fear or repulsion of a snake." That may be true in some cases, but in view of the terrible descriptions of impartial eye-witnesses quoted above, what can be

the use of making these general denials of what we all know to be a fact?

Still more absurd is the plea advanced in certain quarters that the process being a "natural" one, based on a "divine" ordinance, it is "blasphemous" to describe it as "repulsive." "We follow God's laws and ordinances, and they must be right," was the reply of a keeper, when asked by an indignant spectator why the snakes were thus fed; and another "reptilian" writer has urged that "to declare the use of live food to be cruel is to bring that charge not against Dr. Mitchell, but against the Designer of Nature Himself."* Serpent-feeding at the Zoo is repulsive for this reason—that, so far from being a natural process, it is a highly artificial one. The pythons in their natural state are not the diseased and weakly creatures that captivity often makes them, unable to kill their prey with dexterity; nor are they confined in a small den, with insufficient room to use their coils effectively; nor, again, do they find domestic goats provided for them without the necessity of bestirring themselves. What would be less "natural," for instance, than the state of the "superb reticulated python" which died in the Jardin des Plantes in 1902 owing to his inability to take food? "He was offered the most various foods," said a writer in the *Revue Scientifique*, "but all were obstinately refused. Sheep, rabbits, geese, ducks, and chickens, were in turn offered, but whilst at times he stifled them in his coils, he left them without touching them." And this is what our zoological friends condone as "a natural process."

* So we have it in the "Hymn of the Pious Reptile-Keepers" (*The Humanitarian*, June, 1907):—

"Down pythons' throats we thrust live goats,
Their natural food—oh, rather!
Then lift our eyes, and name the wise
Beneficent All-Father."

LIVE FOOD NOT NECESSARY.

We hold, then, that there could be no adequate excuse for such hideous sacrifice of the higher life to these useless reptiles, even if it were a fact, as so often asserted, that snakes will only feed on living prey. But it is *not* a fact. An agent of the R.S.P.C.A., who was sent to Paris in 1881 to test the experience of the managers of the Jardin des Plantes, learnt that the head-keeper "had since 1874 always fed the reptiles, and even the adders, with dead mice and rats, and had never experienced any difficulty or refusal on the part of the serpents in taking dead food" (*Animal World*, June, 1881). In 1903, by the courtesy of Mr. W. T. Hornaday, who, as director of the New York Zoological Park, speaks with peculiar authority, the Humanitarian League was able to publish the following information:

"All our larger snakes," says Mr. Hornaday, "such as the pythons, boa-constrictors, and anacondas, are fed with freshly-killed animals. We do not find it at all necessary to offer them food alive, as we find that if a snake is disposed to take food, it will accept a freshly-killed rabbit or fowl even more readily than if it were alive. It is necessary, however, to introduce the food-animal with some skill and judgment in order that the serpent will be tempted to seize it promptly and proceed to swallow it. As a matter of fact, a serpent which is disinclined to eat can often be teased with a freshly-killed animal into seizing and swallowing it, when the chances are that a living animal, turned loose in the cage, would be ignored.

"If those who doubt the possibilities in feeding dead animals to serpents could see the business-like precision with which our keepers of reptiles distribute freshly-killed rats, mice, fowls, rabbits, and guinea-pigs, I think they would agree with us that it is much easier to feed with dead animals than with living animals, even if there were no objection to the latter on the score of cruelty."*

* As shewing the adaptability of some serpents, see an interesting passage in a work entitled "The Tale of the Serpent," by "Sundowner," where it is stated that the Papuan boa-constrictor

Again, as showing the absurdity of the pretence, kept up until quite recently by the Zoological Society of London, that it was necessary to give live kids to pythons,† I would draw attention to the following passage which appeared a few months ago in the Journal of the Royal Microscopical Society:—

“W. Hartmann describes an astonishing sight which he saw in Hagenbeck’s Zoological Garden. A specimen of *Python reticulata*, about 25 ft. in length, swallowed on June 7th, 1906, a swan weighing 18 lbs., and two days later a roebuck of 67 lbs. Another swallowed within two days two roebucks of 28 lbs. and 39 lbs., and soon thereafter a chamois of 71 lbs.”

Now, it is a curious fact that whereas the pythons belonging to the Zoological Society of London have until recently demanded the sacrifice of live goats, the large reptiles in the Hamburg menagerie have long exhibited this hearty appetite for dead food, for we have Carl Hagenbeck’s authority for saying that they are fed solely on animals which have died in his gardens. Why is it that live prey has been necessary for pythons in London, when it was not necessary in Hamburg and New York?‡ It is superfluous, however, to labour this point, as to the *possibility* of feeding the larger serpents on dead food, for, as will presently appear, it is now conceded by the Zoological Society itself.

PRINCIPLE VERSUS PRACTICE.

It is instructive to note how rapidly the Zoological Society, under the pressure of humanitarian agitation, has adopted practically a fruit diet in New Guinea, owing to the difficulty of obtaining animals.

† In a letter, dated May 30th, 1907, the Secretary of the Zoological Society admitted to Mr. George Greenwood, M.P., that two live kids had been given to the constrictors in the preceding year.

‡ Both Mr. W. T. Hornaday and Herr Hagenbeck hold that there are *some* serpents—the rattlesnakes, for instance—which need live food; but even on this point some doubt is beginning to be felt.

awoke to the fact that, in theory at any rate, live food is not necessary for serpents. When Mr. Stephen Coleridge, at the annual meeting of the Society in April, 1907, presented to the Duke of Bedford, as President, an influentially signed memorial organised by the Humanitarian League, he was greeted with derisive cries of “You’ll never get snakes to touch dead food;” and all that Dr. Chalmers Mitchell could promise was that “they might get at least one more snake to take dead food than they had at present.”* But memorial followed memorial, questions were asked in Parliament, and there was widespread discussion in the Press, with the result that, seven months later, when Mr. Rowland Hunt, M.P., again raised the subject at a meeting of the Zoological Society, Dr. Mitchell found it advisable to inform the Press that the use of live prey in the feeding of the snakes had been discontinued. Thus the *Morning Leader* (Nov. 22nd, 1907) announced that “the satisfactory statement was made to a *Morning Leader* representative by Dr. P. Chalmers Mitchell that the practice of feeding the snakes with live animals had ceased eighteen months ago;” and both the *Morning Post* and the *Daily Telegraph* of the same date reported Dr. Mitchell as saying that “in the vast majority of cases, this [*i.e.*, the use of dead food] had been successful, and in the last eighteen months it had been completely so.” To show how entirely Dr. Mitchell’s words were understood in this sense, let me quote also what was said by *Country Life* of Nov. 30th:—

“Dr. Chambers Mitchell and Mr. R. T. Pocock began a series of experiments, which finally enabled them to an-

* See “The Hymn of the Pious Reptile Keepers,” in which reference is made to Dr. Mitchell’s delicious statement:

“Our Boss, a solemn vow he takes
That nothing can be done more;
Then winks: ‘Well, yes, of all our snakes
We might convert just *one more*.’”

nounce, at the last scientific meeting of the Society, that they had succeeded in feeding every snake in the Society's collection on dead food. . . . Henceforth no live prey will be used for this purpose at the Gardens."

The *Field*, also, of the same date, spoke of "the question of supplying snakes with dead food" as "satisfactorily solved," and added that this method was "not quite a novelty." No conversion, as far as words go, could have been more complete.

But in spite of these emphatic assurances, the Humanitarian League had equally emphatic information that the use of live animals in the feeding of the venomous snakes (as distinguished from the constrictors) had *not* been discontinued. Mr. George Greenwood, M.P., who had put a question on the subject in the House of Commons in May, 1907, accordingly wrote to Dr. Chalmers Mitchell to ask whether he had been correctly reported in the papers of November 22nd, and, if so, whether his statements referred to *all* the snakes, or only to the pythons and large snakes. Instead of replying to this most pertinent inquiry, Dr. Mitchell sent a long letter marked "private," and containing, in Mr. Greenwood's words, "allegations very offensive both to myself and others with whom I act." Now it is evident that if the venomous snakes are not to be included in Dr. Mitchell's assurance, the public, through the Press, has been very grossly deceived.

It is noticeable, too, that subsequent statements made by Dr. Mitchell by no means tally with the one communicated to the reporters. Thus, in an article on "The London Zoo" (*London Magazine*, April, 1908) he remarked that during "six months, covering the summer of 1907," he "found it unnecessary to give living prey to any snake, venomous or other"—the "eighteen months," it will be observed, having here dwindled to "six"; and what is still more disconcerting, we read in his "Official Guide to the Gar-

dens" (sixth edition, 1908) of the pythons and boas—serpents which can admittedly be fed on dead food—that "*as far as possible* these snakes are fed on freshly-killed animals." That is, we are back at the old evasive assurance given by Mr. Sclater five years earlier!

What then *are* we to believe of the present practice of the Zoological Society in this respect? We need not say that we should welcome any clear assurance that the use of live food has been discontinued; but from the persistent silence maintained by the Society, and the fact that the secrecy under which the feeding is carried on has of late been redoubled, we are compelled to draw less favourable conclusions.

An amateur detective, who made a number of unsuccessful attempts to see the weekly feeding of the serpents, once told me some entertaining stories of the precautions taken by the officials of the "Zoo" to prevent their secret being discovered. The thing is comical enough; yet, viewed in another aspect, it is rather pitiful that a great scientific Society should be reduced to a deliberate concealment of facts which it is its business to publish, and should breed a sort of obscurantist mind which is the exact opposite of the scientific. It is not surprising that this zoological type should have been discussed by a humanitarian satirist in his lines "On an Unclassed Reptilian":—

What worm is this of town or field,
Dull tortuous man or serpent sly,
Who, having brain and tongue, doth yield
To question straight no straight reply?
Challenged, he can but hiss and crawl,
A human reptile wriggling low:
Was it on such the curse did fall?
"Upon thy belly shalt thou go."

WHY NOT INSPECTION?

One thing is certain—that the public has a right.

to ask the Zoological Society to submit its Reptile House to some independent inspection. From statements published in the Press we gather that there is some desire on the part of the Society to ask the Government to subsidise its work. It is to be hoped that, if such a proposal be made, no subsidy will be granted, unless under conditions which will render the Zoological Gardens liable to inspection by the representatives of some outside body such as the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. The Zoological Society appeals to the public for support; it has therefore no right to refuse, as at present, to give satisfactory guarantees that no cruelty is permitted on its grounds in the use of live animals as food for serpents. It seems obvious that, in the interests certainly of the animals and of the public—and, one would have thought, of the Society itself—the proper course would be to place the Gardens under some efficient inspection. If slaughterhouses are liable to be inspected, why should menageries and reptile-houses be exempt?

It would be much better to exhibit snakes and other reptiles as stuffed specimens—set in natural attitudes, instead of, as now, lying half hidden, and to all appearance inanimate, in the corner of a glass case—than to kill the higher and more sensitive mammals and birds on their behalf. It is utter nonsense to appeal to “nature” on such a question, because, as has been pointed out, the whole situation of caged animals is artificial and contrary to nature, nor is the practice of animals in a free wild state any guide whatever for human ethics. But in this, as in all other matters, there are *degrees* of right and wrong; and as it is certainly much more barbarous to give a live animal than a dead one to a snake, humanitarians would accept as at least a temporary solution of the difficulty the rule that no *live* animal shall be given as food.

How strongly genuine naturalists feel on this subject may be seen from the protest made by the Rev. F. O. Morris (*Animal World*, June 1st, 1871) against feeding the seals at the Zoological Gardens on live fish—“an exhibition which is neither pleasing nor profitable.” But if a repugnance is felt by real lovers of nature to sacrificing even fish in such a manner, how much more should we shrink from the disgusting cruelty of inflicting such a death on the highly organised mammals and birds, even of the domestic order! A person who can deliberately order a goat to be given alive to a python is, in my opinion, guilty of as gross an offence as it is possible to commit (though it may not be a *legal* offence) in the way of cruelty; for to subject a sensitive animal of the higher species to the horrible fate of being devoured by a sluggish reptile is a shocking breach of man’s duty to his lower fellow-beings. We are not called upon to interfere with the natural working of natural laws, but we *are* bound not to do violence to our own instincts of humaneness.

We are confident that, as the feeling of mankind toward the non-human races is educated and humanised, there will be less and less desire to keep reptiles (or, indeed, any animals) in useless captivity for purposes of morbid exhibition; but, pending that time, we would welcome a method of snake-feeding which is, at least, less sickening than that which the *savants* of the Zoological Society are so reluctant to abandon.

We shall continue to press this question until some intelligible answer is forthcoming. The “Zoo” is a place of amusement supported by the public, and the public has full right to know what goes on there, whether openly or behind the scenes. The secret of the reptile house will not continue to be a secret if any humanitarian activity can expose it.