

Gerald
Durrell at
100

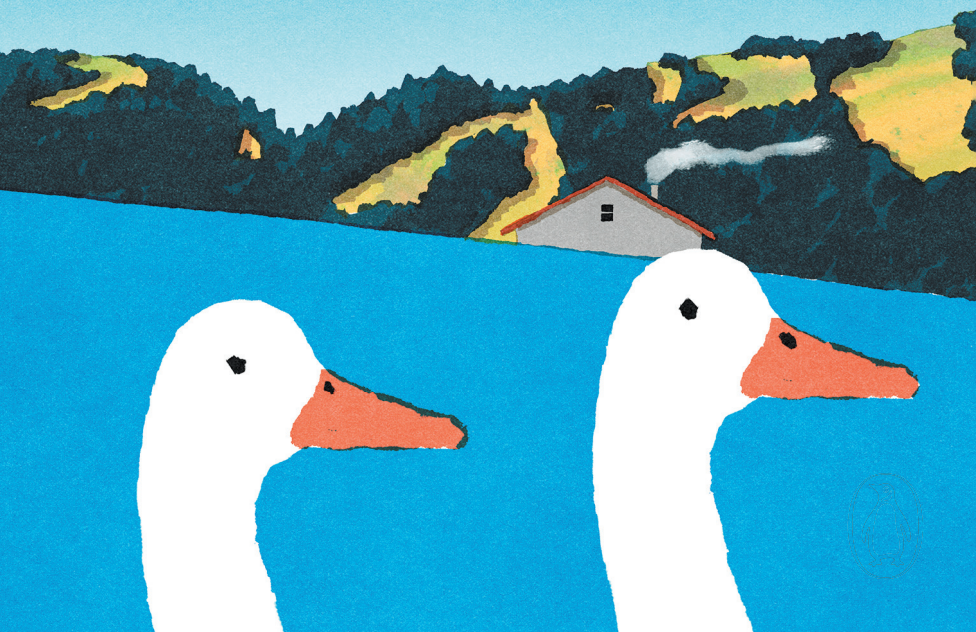


'A renegade who was right . . .
He was truly a man before his time'

Sir David Attenborough

GERALD DURRELL

BEASTS IN MY BELFRY



BEASTS IN MY
BELFRY

Copyrighted Material

BY GERALD DURRELL

Ark on the Move

The Ark's Anniversary

Beasts in My Belfry

Catch Me a Colobus

The Drunken Forest

Fillets of Plaice

Golden Bats and Pink Pigeons

Marrying Off Mother and Other Stories

Menagerie Manor

The New Noah

The Picnic and Suchlike Pandemonium

Rosy is My Relative

The Stationary Ark

Three Singles to Adventure

Two in the Bush

Copyrighted Material

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gerald Durrell was born in Jamshedpur, India, in 1925. He returned to England in 1928 before settling on the island of Corfu with his family. In 1945 he joined the staff of Whipsnade Park as a student keeper, and in 1947 he led his first animal-collecting expedition to the Cameroons. He later undertook numerous further expeditions, visiting Paraguay, Argentina, Sierra Leone, Mexico, Mauritius, Assam and Madagascar. His first television programme, *Two in the Bus*, which documented his travels to New Zealand, Australia and Malaya was made in 1962; he went on to make seventy programmes about his trips around the world. In 1959 he founded the Jersey Zoological Park, and in 1964 he founded the Jersey Wildlife Preservation Trust. He was awarded the OBE in 1982. Encouraged to write about his life's work by his brother, Durrell published his first book, *The Overloaded Ark*, in 1953. It soon became a bestseller and he went on to write thirty-six other titles, including *My Family and Other Animals*, *The Bafut Beagles*, *Encounters with Animals*, *The Drunken Forest*, *A Zoo in My Luggage*, *The Whispering Land*, *Menagerie Manor*, *The Amateur Naturalist* and *The Aye-Aye and I*. Gerald Durrell died in 1995.

Copyrighted Material

Gerald Durrell

BEASTS IN MY
BELFRY



PENGUIN BOOKS
Copyrighted Material

PENGUIN BOOKS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.

Penguin Random House UK,
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW
penguin.co.uk



Penguin
Random House
UK

First published by Collins 1973
This edition published in Penguin Books 2025
001

Copyright © Gerald Durrell, 1973

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Penguin Random House values and supports copyright.

Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes freedom of expression and supports a vibrant culture. Thank you for purchasing an authorized edition of this book and for respecting intellectual property laws by not reproducing, scanning or distributing any part of it by any means without permission. You are supporting authors and enabling Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for everyone.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems. In accordance with Article 4(3) of the DSM Directive 2019/790, Penguin Random House expressly reserves this work from the text and data mining exception

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-405-97890-3

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future
for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from
Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.



Copyrighted Material

*He prayeth well, who loveth well
Both man and bird and beast.*

Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

Contents

1. A Bevy of Beasts 1
 2. A Lusk of Lions 18
 3. A Triumph of Tigers 34
 4. A Plash of Polars 52
 5. A Gallivant of Gnus 76
 6. A Bumble of Bears 97
 7. A Loom of Giraffe 112
 8. A Superiority of Camels 129
 9. Odd-Beast Boy 145
 10. Beasts in My Belfry 160
- Epilogue 167

Copyrighted Material

1. *A Bevy of Beasts*

They say that a child who aspires to be an engine driver very rarely grows up to fill that role in life. If this is so then I am an exceptionally lucky person, for at the age of two I made up my mind quite firmly and unequivocally that the only thing I wanted to do was to study animals. Nothing else interested me.

I clung to this decision throughout my formative years with the tenacity of a limpet and drove my friends and relatives mad by catching or buying and inserting into the house every conceivable sort of creature, ranging from monkeys to the humble garden snail, from scorpions to eagle owls. Harassed by such a pageant of wildlife, my family comforted themselves with the thought that it was just a phase I was passing through and that I would soon grow out of it. But with each fresh acquisition my interest in animals quickened and deepened until, by my late teens, I knew without a shadow of a doubt what I wanted to be: simply, I wanted to become a collector of animals for zoos and, later on – when I had made my fortune this way – to have a zoo of my own.

This did not seem to me to be a very wild or unreasonable ambition but the difficulty lay in how to achieve it. There were, unfortunately, no schools for incipient animal collectors and none of the professional collectors then operating would take on anybody who had only unbounded enthusiasm and very little practical experience to offer. It was not enough, I decided, to be able to say that you had hand-reared baby hedgehogs or bred geckos in a biscuit tin; an animal collector must know at the drop of a hat how to get a stranglehold on a giraffe or side-step

Copyrighted Material

a charging tiger. But it was exceedingly difficult to gain this sort of experience while living in a seaside town in England. This had been brought home to me recently in a rather forcible manner. I had received a phone call from a boy I knew in the New Forest who possessed what he described as a baby fallow deer that he was hand-rearing. He explained that, as he was moving to a flat in Southampton, he was unable to keep this most desirable pet. It was tame and house-trained, he said, and could be delivered to me within twenty-four hours or sooner by his father.

I was in a quandary. My mother, the only member of my family who could be remotely described as sympathetic to my interest in wildlife, was out, so I could not ask her how she would view the addition of a fallow deer, however young, to my already extensive menagerie. Yet, there was the deer's owner clamouring for an immediate reply.

'My dad says we'll have to destroy it if you don't have it,' he explained lugubriously.

That clinched it. I said I would be pleased to take delivery of the deer, whose name was Hortense, the following day.

When my mother returned from shopping I had my story all ready, a story that would have softened a heart of stone, much less such a susceptible one as my mother possessed. There was this poor little fawn, torn away from its mother, now under sentence of death unless we helped. How could we refuse? My mother, convinced by my description that the fawn was about the size of a small terrier, said that to allow it to be killed was unthinkable when we could (as I pointed out) keep it in a tiny corner of the garage.

'Of course we must have it,' she said.

She then phoned up the dairy and ordered an extra ten pints of milk a day, being under the vague impression that growing deer needed a lot of milk.

Hortense arrived the following day in a horsebox. As the deer was led out of this conveyance by its owner it became immediately obvious that, firstly, Hortense was unmistakably male

Copyrighted Material

and, secondly, that he was some four years old. He had a pair of chocolate-coloured horns edged with a forest of lethal spikes and he stood, in his elegant white-spotted coat, some three and a half feet high.

‘But that’s surely not a baby!’ said my mother, aghast.

‘Oh, yes, madam,’ said the boy’s father hastily, ‘only a youngster. Lovely animal, tame as a dog.’

Hortense rattled his horn up against the gate like a crackle of musketry and then leant forward and delicately plucked one of Mother’s prize chrysanthemums. Chewing it in a meditative sort of way, he surveyed us with limpid eyes. Hastily, before Mother could recover from the shock of meeting Hortense, I thanked the boy and his father profusely, grabbed the dog lead that was attached to Hortense’s collar, and led him towards the garage. Not for anything would I confess to Mother that I, too, had imagined Hortense to be a tiny, heart-melting fawn. I had expended a large sum of money on a feeding bottle for what now turned out to be, if not Landseer’s *Stag at Bay*, at least a close approximation of it.

Followed by Mother, Hortense and I entered the garage where, before I could tie him up, he had evinced a deadly loathing for the wheelbarrow which he attempted unsuccessfully to toss in the air. He eventually had to content himself with merely overturning it and disembowelling it on the ground. I tied him to the wall and hastily removed any gardening equipment that I thought was liable to incur his wrath.

‘I do hope he’s not going to be too fierce, dear,’ said my mother worriedly. ‘You know how Larry feels about fierce things.’

I knew only too well how my elder brother felt about anything, fierce or otherwise, in the animal line and I was only too delighted that he, together with my other brother and sister, happened to be out when Hortense arrived.

‘Oh, he’ll be all right when he settles down,’ I said; ‘he’s just high-spirited.’

At that moment Hortense decided that he did not like being

Copyrighted Material

left alone in the garage and so he charged the door. The whole garage rocked to its foundation.

‘Perhaps he’s hungry,’ said Mother, backing down the path. ‘Yes, I expect that’s it,’ I said. ‘Could you get him some carrots and some biscuits?’

Mother trotted off to procure the necessary deer-soothing food-stuffs while I went in to grapple with Hortense. He was delighted to see me again, as the sideways sweep of his horns catching me in the pit of the stomach showed. However, I found that, like most deer, he was greatly addicted to being scratched round the base of his horns and I soon had him in a semi-comatose condition. Then, when a large packet of water biscuits and a couple of pounds of carrots arrived, he settled down to assuage the hunger which his journey had given him.

While he was thus engaged I phoned up and ordered straw, hay and oats to be delivered. Then, when Hortense had finished his meal, I took him for a walk on the nearby golf-links, where he behaved in the most exemplary fashion. When I got him back home he seemed more than happy to be bedded down in a corner of the garage on a pile of straw with some hay and crushed oats for his supper. I carefully padlocked the garage door and left him. I really felt, as I went to bed, that Hortense was settling down and would make not only a remarkably attractive pet but would give me the experience with larger animals that I so urgently desired.

The following morning I was woken at about five o’clock by a curious noise which sounded as though somebody were dropping highly explosive bombs at regular intervals in the back garden. Deciding that this was impossible, I wondered what on earth it could be. I could tell by the slamming of doors and muttered curses that the rest of the family were wondering what it could be too. I leant out of the window and surveyed the back garden. There, in the dawn light, I could see the garage rocking to and fro like a ship on a rough sea while Hortense demanded his breakfast by the simple expedient of charging the

Copyrighted Material

garage door. Hastily, I rushed downstairs and, with an armful of hay and some crushed oats and carrots, pacified him.

‘What,’ inquired my elder brother at breakfast, fixing me with an unfriendly eye, ‘have you got locked in the garage?’

Before I could deny all knowledge of anything in the garage my mother rushed nervously to my defence.

‘It’s only a tiny little deer, dear,’ she said. ‘Have some more tea.’

‘It didn’t sound tiny,’ said Larry. ‘It sounded more like Mr Rochester’s wife.’

‘It’s so tame,’ my mother went on, ‘and it loves Gerry.’

‘Well, it’s a good thing somebody does,’ said Larry. ‘All I say is, keep the damned thing away from me. Life is difficult enough without having herds of caribou in the garden.’

I was not popular that week. My marmoset had tried to climb into bed with Larry in the early morning and, on being repulsed, had bitten him in the ear; my magpies had uprooted a whole row of tomatoes carefully planted by my other brother, Leslie; and one of my grass snakes had escaped and been found with piercing screams by my sister Margo behind the sofa cushions. I was determined, therefore, that Hortense should be kept well away from the family. However, my hopes were short-lived.

It was one of those rare days you sometimes get in an English summer when the sun actually shines, and Mother, carried away by this phenomenon, had decided to have tea on the lawn. So when Hortense and I got back from our walk across the golf-links we were treated to the sight of the family sitting in deckchairs grouped round a trolley on which reposed the accoutrements of tea-making, sandwiches, a plum cake, and large bowls of raspberries and cream. Coming suddenly round the side of the house and finding my family thus arrayed took me aback. Not so Hortense, who with one glance took in the peaceful scene. He decided that between him and the safety of the garage lay a monstrous and probably dangerous enemy with four wheels – a tea trolley. There was only one thing he could

Copyrighted Material

do. Uttering a harsh bleat as a war cry, he lowered his head and charged, whipping his lead out of my fingers. He hit the trolley amidships, getting his horns tangled and showering tea things in all directions.

My family were completely trapped, for it is extraordinarily difficult, if not impossible, to leave a deckchair with alacrity even in moments of crisis. The result was that Mother was scalded with boiling tea, my sister was bespattered with cucumber sandwiches and Larry and Leslie received, in equal quantities, the raspberries and cream.

‘It’s the last straw!’ roared Larry, flicking mashed raspberries from his trousers. ‘Get that bloody animal out of here, do you hear?’

‘Now, now, dear! Language,’ said Mother pacifically. ‘It was an accident. The poor animal didn’t mean it.’

‘Didn’t mean it? Didn’t mean it?’ said Larry, his face suffused.

He pointed a quivering finger at Hortense, who, somewhat alarmed by the havoc he had created, was standing there demurely with the tea cloth hitched to his antlers, like a wedding veil.

‘You saw it deliberately charge the trolley, and you say it didn’t mean it?’

‘What I mean, dear,’ said Mother, flustered, ‘is that it didn’t mean to put the raspberries on you.’

‘I don’t care what it meant,’ said Larry vehemently. ‘I don’t want to know what it meant. All I know is that Gerry must get rid of it. I will not have rampaging brutes like that around. Next time it might be one of us it attacks. Who the hell do you think I am? Buffalo Bill Cody?’

So, in spite of my pleas, Hortense was banished to a nearby farm, and with his departure vanished my only chance of experience with large animals in the home. It seemed there was only one thing for me to do – get a job in a zoo.

Having decided this, I sat down and wrote what seemed to me an extremely humble letter to the Zoological Society of

Copyrighted Material

London, which, in spite of the war, still maintained the largest collection of living creatures ever assembled in one spot. Blissfully unaware of the enormity of my ambition, I outlined my plans for the future, hinted that I was just the sort of person they had always been longing to employ, and more or less asked them on what day I should take up my duties.

Normally, such a letter as this would have ended up where it deserved – in the wastepaper basket. But my luck was in, for it arrived on the desk of a most kindly and civilised man, one Geoffrey Vevers, then Superintendent of the London Zoo. I suppose something about the sheer audacity of my letter must have intrigued him for, to my delight, he wrote and asked me to attend an interview in London. At the interview, spurred on by Geoffrey Vevers's gentle charm, I prattled on interminably about animals, animal collecting and my own zoo. A lesser man would have crushed my enthusiasm by pointing out the wild impracticability of my schemes but Vevers listened with great patience and tact, commended my line of approach to the problem, and said that he would give the matter of my future some thought. I left him even more enthusiastic than before.

Some time later I received a courteous letter from him saying that unfortunately there were no vacancies for junior staff at London Zoo but that I could, if I cared to, have a position as student keeper at Whipsnade, the Zoological Society's country zoo. If he had written offering me a breeding pair of snow leopards I could not have been more delighted.

Within a few days, wildly excited, I set forth for Bedfordshire, taking with me two suitcases, one stuffed with old clothes and the other with books on natural history and innumerable fat notebooks in which I was going to note down everything that I observed about my animal charges and record every pearl of wisdom that dropped from the lips of my fellow workers.

It was in the mid-nineteenth century that the great German animal dealer Karl Hagenbeck created an entirely new form of zoological garden. Up until then animals had been stuffed into ill-designed, unsanitary, heavily-barred cages that made it

Copyrighted Material

difficult for the public to see the animals and even more so for the animals to survive these appalling concentration-camp-like conditions. Hagenbeck had an absolutely new conception of how animals should be displayed. Instead of grim, iron-barred dungeons, he gave his animals light and space, with huge artificial mountains of rocks to climb on, and he separated them from the public with either dry moats or moats filled with water. To the pundits of zoo keeping this was heresy. To begin with, they said it was unsafe, for animals were sure to get out of moats, and even if this did not happen, all the animals would die for it was well known that, unless you kept tropical animals in fuggy, germ-infested steam heat, they would die instantly. The fact that tropical animals frequently languished and died in these Turkish-bath conditions anyway was neither here nor there. But, to the pundits' surprise, Hagenbeck's animals flourished. They not only improved their condition in their outdoor quarters but even bred successfully. Once Hagenbeck had proved his contention that keeping animals under these conditions made them not only happier and healthier but a better and more spectacular show from the public's point of view, then all zoological gardens in the world started to turn over to this new method of keeping and displaying their collections.

Whipsnade, then, was really London Zoo's attempt to out-Hagenbeck Hagenbeck. This huge farm estate perched up on the Dunstable Downs had been purchased by the society and laid out at considerable expense. Here animals were to be displayed in as close to natural surroundings as possible; that is, surroundings that to the zoo-going public seemed natural. Lions were to have forests to live in; wolves to have woods; and for the antelopes and other hoofed animals, great rolling paddocks. From my point of view Whipsnade then was the nearest approach to going on safari that one could attempt at that time. For this was in the days before the aristocrats of England were forced by crippling death duties to become a collection of zoo keepers.

Whipsnade, I found, was an extremely small village consist-

Copyrighted Material