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BEAUTY AND THE BEASTS

Girls As Keepers At Wellington Zoo

WHEN you go to the Wellington Zoo, you should walk over the hill from Lyall Bay and come down through the pine trees, then you get an aperitif, as it were, for the things to come. As soon as you step down into the pines, zoo sounds and zoo smells rush at you. Tantalising glimpses through the trees of pelicans, fractious geese, and screaming cockatoos keep pace with mysterious roars, screeches, and bellows so that by the time you reach the zoo gates, you are well primed for the zoo proper. A much better beginning than arriving prosaically by tram.

I really went to the zoo on Saturday to see the new zoo-keepers, for the Wellington Zoo has recently taken on two young women to help make up their depleted staff. ("For the duration, and after, we hope," the girls said). I saw them at work, they were enjoying every minute of it and already the animals seemed to love them. They went at their jobs with zest and alacrity, clambering over high wire fences and nimbly dodging an excited emu with great unconcern. The emu, by the way, emits a loud drumming sound when it is disturbed, for all the world like an African tom-tom, and its breast becomes purple. "That's its heart beating," the girls explained. "You can hear it quite a long way off."

They were changing the emu's water while they spoke, one trying to attract its attention while the other turned on the tap. The emu rather spoilt the effect, though, by suddenly plomping itself down into the clean water and refusing to budge. The girls were rather cautious with the emu because he had already rushed one of them that morning, so they left him sitting there.

In the Dog Kennel

"Aren't you ever frightened?" I asked them, but they assured me they weren't.

"Too much the other way sometimes," one added, "though it doesn't do to be over-confident; you might become careless."

I watched one of them crawl into the huskies' kennel and root out old bones which the dogs had hidden under the straw, and all the time the huskies were leaping and panting around her. Then I saw her walk across the red deer's paddock to the water-trough and stop to dodge his lowered antlers and shaking head, behind a tree.

Their Own Cottage

When I first went into the zoo, I wondered where I'd find the girls, the place seemed so large; then I saw a girl walking down the drive towards me; grey slacks, green shirt, short cut hair, and brown eyes. I told her what I wanted and sure enough, she was one of the keepers. She had to buy some lunch first, then she took it and me up to their cottage.

The other girl was just sweeping some gravel out of the cottage. She smiled at me and I felt at ease. Their cottage had one room only eight feet by eight feet, and a strong smell of paint, but they have lace curtains in the window and a pastel drawing by one of the girls on the wall. There's a kerosene-heater for boil-

ing the kettle, a table, two chairs, two cupboards and a wash basin.

"It's a bit small but we manage," they said.

First Farm, Then Zoo

Then we went out and started to climb up the hill.

"What made you take up this work?" I asked.

They saw it advertised and it sounded the right thing for them. One girl used to work in a shop, but when war came and there were no imported goods coming in, she grew tired of that life and went away to be a land girl.

"I was one of the first land-girls, and now I'm one of the first women zoo-keepers," she explained and laughed.

"I've lived on a farm all my life," the other girl said. "This is easy work for me."

"Zoo animals are a bit different from farm animals, aren't they?" I queried.

"Well, each animal has its own individual ways, you know," the other answered. "You get to know them, working with them all the time. Watch this red deer when we run its water in."

As soon as she reached her hand in and turned on the tap, the deer bounded over and shoved its face and neck under the running water, and splashed about with naive enjoyment.

"It always does that," one of the girls



"The emu rather spoilt the effect"

told me, "and this deer always comes up to have its nose rubbed, but this one is quarrelsome and never does. That goat was brought in from up the Hutt. It had strayed on to the railway line." While she was talking a very small brown goat bounded into view. The way that kid cavorted!—ever afterwards the most frisky lamb will seem to me merely an imitation of a staid old woman trying to jump.

"The public always likes the babies best," the girl added.

In the Storehouse

Then we went down to the storehouse. I saw hay, neatly trussed, stored round the room, and big bins of wheat, maize, barley, other cereals too, and a mincer for grinding them.

"We've got plenty to do here on wet days," they said.



"One of them crawled into the huskies' kennel"

In another building a huge haunch of meat was hanging. One of the girls started hacking off chunks for the dingoes, wolf, boar and huskies. "I thought I'd never bring myself to do this," she smiled. "It's surprising what you get used to."

The animals must have known what was coming because I could hear them barking and jumping about, across the valley; and when we came out of the building they almost went mad with excitement.

Their Daily Round

"What are some of the things you have to do?" I asked one of the girls.

"Well," she explained, "we start at eight and go on till five and we have to take turns with the week-ends. Today we are on what we call the back-round. We start by feeding the camel and the emu, then comes cleaning the cages of the dogs and the wolf, preparing food for the kangaroos, llamas, goats, deer, bison, and so on, changing all their waters, feeding the ducks and geese, tidying the paths and the enclosures, gathering docks, grass and rauriki, getting the pig's bread, keeping an eye on everything, and of course answering the questions of the public. No, we don't mind them looking at us while we work," she said, as people gathered round to watch them feed the dingoes.

"I don't think the public takes enough interest in the zoo. People come once and that's enough for them. They should come often and study the different animals and really get to know something about them, like one old man who visits here. He comes regularly just to see the wolf."

Vivette the Monkey

"You can't go without seeing Vivette. She's my favourite," said the girl from the shop.

Vivette is a small monkey. I watched it climbing over the girl's shoulders and up her arms. Then it saw the zipp-faster on her blouse, and gravely pulled it up and down, down and up, nodding its head all the while. I watched it sitting sedately on her knee, then the next moment it had snatched a padlock from her pocket and was climbing madly up

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