

Adopting an Anteater – Gerald Durrell.

Making a collection of two hundred birds, mammals and reptiles is rather like having two hundred delicate babies to look after. Occasionally you get a baby wild animal whose mother has met with an accident and then you take a step closer to parenthood. When you capture one of these you must be prepared for a good deal of hard work and worry; for after a day or two you will have definitely become the mother or father.

Some time ago my wife and I were on a collecting trip in Paraguay, that country shaped like a boot-box which lies almost in the exact centre of South America. Here, in a remote part of Chaco, we assembled a lovely collection of animals. Unfortunately it was just as we were about to leave that the Paraguayans decided to have a revolution, and as a direct result we had to release nearly the whole of our collection and escape to Argentina in a tiny four-seater plane.

Just before our retreat, an Indian had wandered into our camp carrying a sack from which had come the most extraordinary noises. It sounded like a cross between a cello in pain and a donkey with laryngitis. Opening the sack, the Indian tipped out one of the most delightful baby animals I had ever seen. She was a young giant anteater, and she could not have been more than a week old. She was about the size of a corgie, with black, ash-grey and white fur, a long slender snout and a pair of tiny, rather bleary eyes. The Indian said he had found her wandering about in the forest, honking forlornly. He thought her mother might have been killed by a jaguar.

The arrival of this baby put me in a predicament. I knew that we would be leaving soon and that the plane was so tiny that most of our equipment would have to be left behind to make room for the five or six creatures we were determined to take with us. To accept, at that stage, a baby anteater who weighed a considerable amount and who would have to be fussed over and bottle-fed, would be lunatic. Quite apart from anything else, no one as far as I knew, had ever tried to rear a baby anteater on a bottle. The whole thing was obviously out of the question. Just as I had made up my mind the baby, still blaring pathetically, suddenly discovered my leg, and with a honk of joy shinned up it, settled herself in my lap and went to sleep. Silently I paid the Indian the price he demanded, and thus became a father to one of the most charming children I have ever met.

Young anteaters, at that age, cling to their mother's back, and, since we had, so to speak, become her parents, she insisted on climbing on to one or the other of us nearly the whole time. Her claws were about three inches long, and she had a prodigious grip with them. During meals she clasped your leg affectionately with three paws, while with her remaining paw held your finger and squeezed it hard at intervals, for she was convinced that this would increase the flow of milk from the bottle. At the end of each feed you felt as though you had been mauled by a grizzly bear, while your fingers had been jammed in a door.

For the first days I carried her about with me to give her confidence. She liked to lie across the back of my neck, her long nose hanging down one side of me and her long tail down the other, like a fur collar. Every time I moved she would tighten her grip in a panic, and this was painful. After the fourth shirt had been ruined I decided that she would have to cling to something else, so I filled a sack full of straw and introduced her to that. She accepted it without any fuss, and so between meals she would lie in her cage, clutching this substitute happily. We had already christened her 'Sarah', and now that she developed this habit of sack-

clutching we gave her a surname, and so she became known as 'Sarah Huggersack'.

Sarah was a model baby. Between feeds she lay quietly on her sack, occasionally yawning and showing a sticky, pinky grey tongue about twelve inches long. When we had to leave Paraguay in our extremely unsafe-looking four-seater plane, Sarah slept peacefully throughout the flight, lying on my wife's lap and snoring gently, occasionally blowing a few bubbles of sticky saliva out of her nose.

When we eventually got on board ship in Buenos Aires, Sarah was not at all sure that she approved of sea-voyages. To begin with, the ship smelt queer; then there was a strong wind which nearly blew her over every time she went for a walk on deck; and lastly, which she hated most of all, the deck would not keep still. First it tilted one way, then it tilted another, and Sarah would go staggering about, honking plaintively, banging her nose on bulkheads and hatch-covers. When the weather improved, however, she seemed to enjoy the trip. Sometimes in the afternoon, when I had time, I would take her up to the promenade deck and we would sit in a deck-chair and sunbathe. She even paid a visit to the bridge, by special request of the captain. I thought it was because he had fallen for her charm and personality, but he confessed that it was because (having seen her only from a distance) he wanted to make sure which end of her was the front.

I must say we felt very proud of Sarah when we arrived in London Docks and she posed for the Press photographers with all the unselfconscious ease of a born celebrity. She even went so far as to lick one of the reporters - a great honour. I hastily tried to point this out to him, while helping to remove a large patch of sticky saliva from his coat. It was not everyone she would lick, I told him. His expression told me that he did not appreciate the point.

Sarah went straight from the docks to a zoo in Devonshire, and we hated to see her go. However, we were kept informed about her progress and she seemed to be doing well.

Some weeks later I was giving a lecture at the Festival Hall, and the organizer thought it would be rather a good idea if I introduced some animal on the stage at the end of my talk. I immediately thought of Sarah. Both the zoo authorities and the Festival Hall Management were willing.

I met Sarah and her keeper at Paddington Station. Sarah was in a huge crate, for she had grown as big as a red setter, and she created quite a sensation on the platform. As soon as she heard my voice she flung herself at the bars of her cage and protruded twelve inches of sticky tongue in a moist and affectionate greeting. People standing near the cage leapt back hurriedly, thinking some curious form of snake was escaping and it took a lot of persuasion before we could find a porter brave enough to wheel the cage on a truck.

While I was on the stage, my wife kept Sarah occupied by running round and round the dressing-room with her, to the horror of one of the porters, who, hearing the noise, was convinced that Sarah had broken out of her cage and was attacking my wife. Eventually, however, the great moment arrived and amid great applause Sarah was carried on to the stage. She was very short-sighted, as all anteaters are, so to her the audience was non-existent. She looked round vaguely to see where the noise was coming from, but decided that it was not really worth worrying about. While I extolled her virtues, she wandered about the stage, oblivious, occasionally snuffling loudly in a corner, and repeatedly approaching the microphone and giving it a quick lick, which left it in a very sticky condition for the next performer. Just as I was telling the audience how well-behaved she was, she discovered the

table in the middle of the stage, and with an immense sigh of satisfaction proceeded to scratch her bottom against one of the legs. She was a great success.

After the show, Sarah held court for a few select guests in her dressing-room, and became so skittish that she even galloped up and down outside in the corridor. Then we bundled her up warmly and put her on the night train for Devon with her keeper.

We did not see Sarah again until quite recently, when we paid her a visit at her zoo. It had been six months since she had last seen us, and quite frankly I thought she would have forgotten us. But the moment we called to her she came bounding out of her sleeping den and rushed to the wire to lick us. We even went into the cage and played with her, a sure sign that she really did recognize us, for no one else except her keeper dared enter.

Eventually we said good-bye to her, rather sadly, and left her sitting in the straw blowing bubbles after us. As my wife said: 'It was rather as though we were leaving our child at boarding school.' We are certainly her adopted parents, as far as Sarah is concerned.

Yesterday we had some good news. We heard that Sarah has got a mate. He is as yet too young to be put in with her, but soon he should be big enough. Who knows, by this time next year we may be grandparents to a fine bouncing baby anteater!