

Wilhelmina – Gerald Durrell

Most people, when they learn for the first time that I collect wild animals for zoos, ask the same question : don't you become attached to your animals and find it difficult to part with them at the end of an expedition? The answer is, of course you do, and sometimes parting with a creature you have kept for eight months can be a heartbreaking process.

Occasionally you even find yourself getting attached to the strangest of beasts, some weird creature you would never in the normal way have thought you could like. One such beast as this, I remember, was Wilhelmina.

Wilhelmina was a whip-scorpion, and if anyone had told me that the day would come when I would feel even the remotest trace of affection for a whip-scorpion I would never have believed them. Of all the creatures on the face of this earth the whip-scorpion is one of the least prepossessing. To those who do not adore spiders (and I am one of those people) the whip-scorpion is a form of living nightmare. It resembles a spider with a body the size of a walnut that has been run over by a steamroller and flattened to a wafer-thin flake. To this flake are attached what appear to be an immense number of long, fine and crooked legs which spread out to the size of a soup-plate. To cap it all, on the front (if such a creature can be said to have a front), are two enormously long slender legs like whips, about twelve inches long in a robust specimen. It possesses the ability to skim about at incredible speed and with apparently no effort - up, down or sideways - and to squeeze its revolting body into a crack that would scarcely accommodate a piece of tissue-paper.

That is a whip-scorpion, and to anyone who distrusts spiders it is the personification of the devil. Fortunately they are harmless, unless you happen to have a weak heart.

I met Wilhelmina when I was on a collecting trip to the tropical forest of West Africa. She was a well-brought-up little whip-scorpion, one of a family of ten, and I started my intimate acquaintance with her when I captured her mother. All this happened quite by chance.

I had for many days been smoking out trees in the forest in search of an elusive little animal known as the pigmy scaly-tail. When, after much fruitless hunting, I did discover a group of these prizes, and moreover actually managed to capture some, I felt very happy. I even started to take a benign interest in the numerous whip-scorpions that were scuttling about the tree. Then suddenly I noticed one which looked so extraordinary that my attention was at once arrested. To begin with, this whip-scorpion seemed to be wearing a green fur-coat that almost completely covered her chocolate body. Secondly, it was working its way slowly and carefully down the tree with none of the sudden fits and starts common to the normal whip-scorpion.

Wondering if the green fur-coat and the slow walk were symptoms of extreme age in the whip-scorpion world I moved closer to examine the creature. To my astonishment I found that the fur-coat was composed of baby whip-scorpions. They were, in extraordinary contrast to their dark-coloured mother, a bright and bilious green, the sort of green that confectioners are fond of using in cake decorations. The mother's slow and stately movement was due to her concern lest one of her babies lose its grip and drop off. Overcome by the discovery of this compassionate side to the whip-scorpion, I decided that here was an ideal chance for me to catch up on my studies of these creatures. So I captured the female very carefully - to avoid dropping any of her babies - and carried her back to camp.

I placed the mother and children in a large roomy box with plenty of cover in the way of bark and leaves. Every morning I had to look under these, rather gingerly I admit, to see if she was all right. I had the female whip-scorpion and her babies for two months, and during that time the babies ceased to ride on their mother's back. They scattered and took up residence in various parts of the box, grew steadily and lost their green colouring in favour of brown. They all appeared to be thriving, and I began to feel rather proud of them. Then one day I returned to camp after a few hours hunting in the forest to find that tragedy had struck.

A tame Patas monkey I kept tied up outside the tent had eaten through his rope and been on a tour of investigation. Before anyone had noticed, he had eaten a bunch of bananas, three mangos and four hard-boiled eggs, he had broken two bottles of disinfectant, and rounded the whole thing off by knocking my whip-scorpion box on to the floor. It promptly broke open and scattered the family on the ground, and the Patas monkey, a creature of depraved habits, had set to work and eaten them. When I got back he was safely tied up again, and suffering from an acute attack of hiccups.

I picked up my whip-scorpion nursery and peered mournfully into it, cursing myself for having left it in such an accessible place, and cursing the monkey for having such an appetite. But then to my surprise and delight, I found, squatting in a solitary state on a piece of bark, one of the baby whip-scorpions. Tenderly I moved it to a smaller and more burglar-proof cage, showered it with slugs and other delicacies and christened it, for no reason at all, *Wilhelmina*.

As she grew older I gave *Wilhelmina* bigger and bigger things to eat. I was so fascinated by her skill and bravery in tackling insects as big or bigger than herself that one day, rather unwisely, I put a very large locust in with her. Without a moment's hesitation, she flew at him and grasped his bulky body in her pincers. To my alarm the locust gave a hearty kick with his powerful hind legs and both he and *Wilhelmina* soared upwards and hit the wire-gauze roof of the cage. This rough treatment did not deter *Wilhelmina* at all, and she continued to hug the locust while he leapt wildly around the cage, thumping against the roof, until eventually he was exhausted. Then she settled down and made short work of him.

By now I had become very fond and not a little proud of *Wilhelmina*. She was, as far as I knew, the only whip-scorpion to have been kept in captivity and she had become very tame. When the time drew near for me to transport my large collection of animals back to England, I decided to take her with me. On the journey down to the coast by lorry *Wilhelmina* behaved like a veteran traveller, sitting in her box quite happily. For the first day on board ship the strange surroundings made her a little sulky, but after that the sea air seemed to do her good and she became positively skittish. This was her undoing.

I had been keeping her carefully in her cage, but then one evening she waggled her whips at me so plaintively that I lifted her out onto the palm of my hand and started to feed her on the few remaining slugs I had brought for her in a tin. She ate two slugs, sitting quietly on my hand, and then suddenly she jumped. She could not have chosen a worse time, for as she was in mid-air a puff of wind swept round the bulkhead and whisked her away. I had a brief glimpse of her whips waving wildly, and then she was over the rail and gone, into the vast heaving landscape of the sea. I rushed to the rail and peered over, but it was impossible to spot so small a creature in the waves and froth below. Hurriedly I threw her box over, in the vain hope that she might find it and use it as a raft. A ridiculous hope, I know, but I did not like to think of her drowning without making some attempt to save her. I never thought I would have been so affected by the loss of such a creature. I had grown very fond of her; she

in her turn had seemed to trust me. It was a tragic way for the relationship to end. But there was one slight consolation: after my association with Wilhelmina I shall never again look at a whip-scorpion with quite the same distaste.