A Woman Lion Tamer

By MAXIMA FRACHETTA

My father was an animal trainer and proprietor of a traveling menagerie in France. I was born in one of his circus wagons, and passed through my babyhood with two lion cubs and a tiny bear as companions. Everyone else about the show was grown up, but us four babies; so wild animals were my only playfellows until I went to school, and it was natural that eventually I sought my career within the confines of a steel bound arena.

During my childhood in France, traveling animal shows were known as *les forains*. Unlike the small provincial circus men of America, who usually carry in their train an army of quick fingered gamblers, the forains were jealous of the high regard in which they were held by the countryfolk, and always led lives of irreproachable respectability. Generally they established headquarters in a large town, and at certain seasons of the year sallied through the country, traveling by wagon, and giving their performances along a route that ended with a short season in Paris.

When I was a young girl, France, ever foremost in the training of animals, supported approximately seventy-five of *les forains*. Florian Laureant, my father, was one of them. His menagerie was located at Bordeaux, and it was there I made my début as a *dompteuse* (a woman trainer).

Frequently I have been asked why I adopted so dangerous a career. Indeed, my father was the first to make the query, when, at the age of fourteen, I intimated my intention of becoming a trainer.

"What shall I do?" I asked. "I was born in a circus wagon, played with baby lions instead of dolls, and have been schooled for the arena by every association. There is nothing else for me."

A Courageous Début

After an argument, lasting intermittently a full year, my father reluctantly gave his consent, and with three months' preparation I made my début, presenting four young lions at the Grand Fair of Bordeaux.

For two years I met with a fair degree of success for one of my age, and then, growing overconfident, I became ambitious to prove my right to the title of "a brave woman" by putting my head in the mouth of a lion. Among men this is a common feat, but with women trainers it is an infrequent trick, owing to the enormous strength of a lion's jaws, against which the power of the hands and arms is almost valueless. Men, with their greater strength and influence over animals, accomplish this trick more easily than a woman, but even the strongest of men would have no chance against the muscles of a lion's jaws, once the beast determined to snap his mouth shut. They are as strong as big steel traps, and many trainers have lost their lives or have been permanently maimed at this foolhardy game.

But the most dangerous things inspire the greatest applause, and therefore I wished to attempt it. Among my four lions was a handsome beast called Leo. My father trained him for the trick, and after I had decided he was safe, I tried it. For several performances I succeeded in putting my head into his mouth and withdrawing it without accident, until one night at Royan, a small town in the south of France, where we were showing.

In preparing for the head and mouth trick, I arranged the lions in the form of a square, with Leo at the angle nearest and facing the audience. Each lion stood on two small pedestals, his fore feet on one and his hind feet resting on the other. The night of my accident Leo was in bad temper. Our place on the program had been changed from the first to the last act, so that we closed the show. Immediately after the audience departed it was our custom to feed the animals, and as wild beasts are very restless while waiting for their food the shifting of our position on the program did not tend to sweeten Leo's mood.

While I was in the arena with my lions, the other animals were pacing up and down their small cages, impatiently growling for the expected feast of blood-red beef. Naturally, this excited my beasts, and I noticed, as they went unwillingly through the performance, that their humor was changing from bad to worse.

When I had sent the lions to their pedestals, preparatory to placing my head in Leo's mouth, I saw that trouble threatened; but I was afraid to be afraid. Once animals are convinced that their trainer fears, the latter's influence is dissipated, and he may as well give up. They will not work for him, and will kill him in the end.

Leo's Menacing Snarl

As I approached Leo, he snarled menacingly. I may have trembled, but I did not pause. My father was standing at the iron gate of the arena, peering through the bars, with one hand waiting on the latch. I called to him, "*Reste tranquil*," as he seemed more nervous than I.

Wishing to cajole the brute, I stroked his back with my whip stock, but he drew away, as if to say, "Don't come near me, unless you want to get hurt!" I grabbed his upper lip with my right hand, and with my left, the lower. He closed his mouth tightly, and I might as well have tried to pry open a locked safe with my naked fingers. As I tugged at his jaws, the skin of his cat-like nose rolled back over his teeth and my father cried in a shrill voice, "Attention!"

Immediately I let go and tried to back out of his reach, but he was too quick for me. His heavy paw, bristling at the end with five steel claws, flew against my corset and knocked me sprawling across the stage. Like a flash he was on me, trying for my throat. My father, who had dashed through the gate at the first attack, fell upon the lion with a heavy hammer, and catching him flush in the eye sent him reeling from my bleeding breast. Five trainers rushed into the cage and drove the other beasts out with revolvers and steel forks, while my father kept after the staggering Leo, raining blow after blow upon his head. The punishment seemed to have no further effect, until he landed a swing right behind the lion's ear and the beast fell over, apparently dead.

When the lion dropped, the breathless audience was hushed as a windless night, and there followed the great moment of pregnant stillness that always precedes a storm of real applause. As my father stood me on my feet and it was evident I had not been mortally hurt, the French audience hurricaned us with bravos as only Frenchmen can. Even in my weakened condition, my spirit was dizzied by the enthusiasm, and willingly I would have gone through the whole affair again for the same enthusiastic approval.

After a hurried examination, the physician who had been called announced that the wounds were not dangerous. He cauterized and sewed them up. There were quite a number of stitches; I forget how many.

Upon recovering from my encounter with Leo, I reentered the arena, presenting the other three lions. Leo was of no further account. After he had regained consciousness, we discovered that he was a "star gazer," as crazy members of the cat family are known among showmen. The beast's brain was affected, and ever afterward he walked aimlessly about his cage staring up in the air, with his head hanging back as if his neck was broken.

For a number of years I continued my career as a *dompteuse*, training bears, leopards, lions, elephants, and pumas, without an adventure of much interest until November 8, 1905.

We were performing at Nantes. I was presenting a mixed group of animals, including Murat, a handsome Bengal tiger. Before our arrival in Nantes I had accidentally flecked Murat in the eye with my whip lash. The sight of his left eye was destroyed, and we left him out of the performance for a fortnight.

At Nantes he had recovered sufficiently to resume work, and on the morning of our arrival I rehearsed my group for the tiger's benefit. When I entered the arena Murat refused to take his accustomed seat on the pedestal. He crouched on the floor with head turned sidewise, to protect the injured eye, and snarled at me, while lashing his tail in fury. I went at him with whip and fork to force him to his seat on the pedestal.

Can't Leap From Sitting Posture

When animals are seated a trainer is reasonably safe, for the beasts cannot leap from a sitting posture. They must crouch on all fours for the spring. It is on this account that a trainer frequently pauses in the middle of a performance with one animal, until he compels another that is walking about to sit down. To the audience nothing seems awry, but every experienced trainer knows that an erect animal is like a gun at full cock, held in careless hands.

For this reason I ordered Murat to his seat, but the giant jungle cat refused to budge. As I jabbed at him with my fork, he crept a few inches toward me, and I saw his back hunch and the muscles of his hind quarters tighten up for a spring. Then I knew he was after my life. When a blazing eyed tiger growls, spits, snarls, and strikes at a trainer with his murderous fore paws, he is dangerous, of course, but as long as he gives in a bit and backs up a trifle now and then, he is under control. When a lion or tiger, however, refuses to budge an inch, creeping forward against whip, threat, and steel, the trainer knows the quicker he can get out of the cage the longer he will live.

It was so with Murat. Holding the sharp end of

Raining Blow After Blow Upon His Head

Doc Ambled Over to Me on His Hind Legs.